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STORIES



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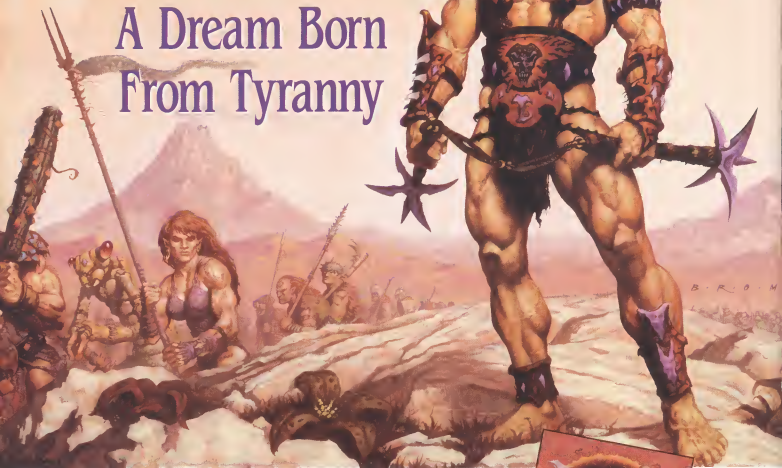


Harry Turtledove
Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.
Ben Bova

Arlan Andrews
Anne McCaffrey
and
Mercedes Lackey



A Dream Born From Tyranny



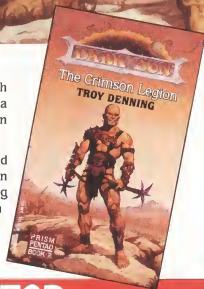
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8159-06

Dear Dr. Asimov . . .

Kim Mohan

. . . I'm sorry I never had a chance to meet you. Even though I probably would have gibbered like an idiot or gone into a swoon if we had ever come face to face, I will always regret not finding out what that experience would have been like.

If I had been able to keep my wits about me, the first thing I would have done is express my gratitude for everything you did for AMAZING® Stories through the years. Sure, your appearances in the magazine were few and (generally) far between, but you'll always occupy a special place in the history of this publication.

We've gotten a lot of mileage out of "Marooned Off Vesta" and the fact that it was this magazine that first published one of your stories. (Never mind the fact that the only reason you gave Ray Palmer a chance at it was because John Campbell turned it down.)

One of the things I like most about "Vesta" is the nifty way you grafted on the sequel, "Anniversary," when Cele Goldsmith (or was it Paul Fairman) asked you to do a new story to commemorate the 20th anniversary of your debut. When I first read the original story, I wondered why you had bothered to include that little scene involving the field glass and the fountain pen. If I had been the editor in 1939, I think I would have recommended cutting that little bit of verbiage, since it has nothing to do with the rest of the plot. But then—twenty years later—the field glass and the fountain pen become the

critical elements in "Anniversary," almost as if you had planned it that way from the very start. Did you know, back in 1938 when you wrote "Vesta," that someday those innocuous items were going to come in handy?

By the way, I was a little perturbed when I read the long article the Associated Press put out about you, in which it was said that "[Y]our first short story, 'Marooned Off Vesta,' after a dozen rejections, ran in the October 1938 issue of *Amazing Stories*." That story certainly had not been rejected a dozen times, and I'm pretty sure that you didn't have a dozen rejections in total at that point in your career. And, of course, October was when you *sold* it; the story didn't get printed until the March 1939 issue. I'm a stickler for accuracy, just as I know you are, and I can't imagine why the AP didn't check its facts more carefully.

Then, two months after "Vesta," came "The Weapon Too Dreadful to Use" (another Campbell reject?), which you later referred to as "a story too dreadful to publish." Obviously, Ray Palmer didn't think so. You may not have been especially proud of that story (to put it mildly), but I can tell you that to this day we still get manuscripts about humans on Venus and little green men and doomsday weapons that aren't half as well written as yours was.

Then there were the two robot stories that ended up in this magazine, "Robot AL-76 Goes Astray" and

"Satisfaction Guaranteed." I don't know how you feel about them in relation to your other work, but Marty Greenberg thought enough of them to include them in a couple of the anthologies we produced a few years ago. They were among the best stories this magazine published during the decades in which they first appeared—big fish in a small pond, maybe, but big fish nonetheless.

"Playboy and the Slime God" was a fun story—and, again, thought of well enough that it was chosen for inclusion in that big *60 Years* anthology that you co-edited with Marty (although I'm sure you had nothing to do with picking your own story).

We didn't know it at the time, and maybe you didn't either, but "Birth of a Notion," that short-short you wrote for this magazine's 50th anniversary issue in June 1976, would be the last piece of original Asimov fiction we would publish. Shortly thereafter, that *other* magazine came into being . . . and I don't suppose *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* ever rejected one of your stories, did it?

I'll never forget you—not only because of what you did for AMAZING Stories but because of your role in getting this bookish kid interested in science fiction back in the early 1960s. There's a large part of me that wishes I weren't writing these words right now—but a larger part that is grateful to you for setting me on the path that led to this destination.

Thank you, Dr. Asimov. For everything. ♦

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

I suppose he's already finished the first volume of *Asimov's Guide to the Afterlife* and is doing research for Volume Two, which deals with the Other Place. He's also been having some lively conversations with Shakespeare, Coleridge, and Lewis Carroll concerning aspects of their work that he discussed in books of his own and now wants to ask them a few questions about. After that comes a new robot novel and then the first novel in the Third Foundation series, to be followed by *After Eternity*, a book of speculative essays. And then . . .

He *has* to be still working, somewhere. It wouldn't be like him, otherwise. But we aren't going to get to read those books ourselves, and that is very, very sad and strange. As is his disappearance from our midst. For half a century he stood at the very center of the science-fiction world, amusing and instructing us at the top of his lungs—and now he's gone. Hard to believe, hard to accept. The magnitude of our loss is incalculable; the reality of it is going to take some time to sink in.

I first set eyes on Isaac Asimov, so far as I can recall, at some minor science-fiction convention underneath the vanished Third Avenue Elevated Railway tracks in Manhattan, somewhere around 1950. He was then just about thirty years old, and already inordinately famous in our little cosmos—the author of the Foundation stories (including the just-published magazine serial “. . . And

Now You Don't," which would become the book *Second Foundation*), and the first nine of the robot stories, and the Thiotimoline hoax, and, of course, the established classic “Nightfall,” which he did when he was only twenty-one. I didn't have much to say to him at that convention. I was just a high-school kid of fourteen or fifteen—a mere pisher, Isaac would have said—who published a smeary mimeographed fanzine and wrote terrible little half-baked stories and had grandiose and implausible dreams of selling one of those stories to a science-fiction magazine some day. I was very shy and had good reason to be. And there was Isaac Asimov, I*S*A*A*A*C A*S*I*M*O*V, jolly and extroverted, holding court at high volume and high energy surrounded by the likes of Frederik Pohl, Lester del Rey, Theodore Sturgeon, and Cyril Kornbluth, in that miserable little drafty rented hall under the Third Avenue El. There was my chance to walk up to him and stick out my hand and say, “Hi, Ike. [That was what everyone called him then, *Ike*. He hated it and finally got everyone to stop.] I'm Bob Silverberg, and I'm only fifteen years old but I'm going to be pretty famous myself some day, so here's your chance to get to know me right at the start. Maybe I'll let you collaborate with me on a novel or two when I have time.” But I wasn't like that—I'm still not much like that—and so I didn't say a word, just stared, thinking, *It's Isaac Asimov. ISAAC ASIMOV!*

(Of course, if my temperament had been more like Harlan Ellison's, say, I'd have marched up to him and said in awe and rapture, “You Isaac Asimov?” And he would have smiled indulgently. And I would have looked him up and down and said, switching in a split-second from a look of awe to one of contempt, “Well, let me tell you, I think you're a *nothing*, Asimov.” Or so the apocryphal story goes. Harlan claims that what he really said was merely, “You aren't so much.” Harlan was like that, then. He's much better behaved now.)

Isaac and I were officially introduced four or five years later, at the 1955 World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland. He was Guest of Honor at that convention, which made him all the more awesome to me, but by now I had begun my own professional career and my adolescent shyness had begun to melt away. I was sharing a room at the con with Randall Garrett, a well-known writer of the period with whom I had been collaborating all through 1955, and he was an old friend of Isaac's. (Garrett was, if anything, even noisier and more extroverted than Isaac, and shared his love of Gilbert & Sullivan, outrageous puns, and boisterous behavior.) Randall dragged me up to Asimov and introduced me as that bright young brat who was suddenly selling stories all over the place. Isaac gave me a nice-to-know-you-kid kind of greeting, pleasant but remote. I mentioned that I was a Columbia student—Isaac

had gone to Columbia too, fifteen years earlier—and he gave me a closer look. What was this, another precocious Jewish kid from New York who had gone to Columbia and was now selling stories all over the place at the absurd age of twenty? Who did I think I was, I could see him thinking—Isaac Asimov? But he managed a few cordial words, anyway, and I wandered away very impressed with myself for having held the attention of Isaac Asimov for sixty seconds or so.

A year later it was all very different. I was an established professional, a member of the gang (sort of a mascot, actually), a Hugo winner at the preposterous age of twenty-one—and I had just gotten married to an attractive young lady who happened to be an electronics engineer. Isaac was always willing to chat with attractive young ladies who happened to be electronics engineers, and when I introduced her to him he greeted her in a way that startled her considerably and which really ought not to be described in detail in a sedate family magazine like *AMAZING® Stories*. I had to explain to her that world-famous science-fiction writers often did things like that and they weren't to be taken seriously. She was amused . . . I think.

Isaac and I never really became what could be called close friends—he didn't go in much for having close friends as I understand the term, and his outward mode of uproarious high-spiritedness was too much unlike my own more aloof and melancholy manner for us to establish any real intimacy. But the superficial resemblances of our lives—the precocity, the New York/Colum-

bia backgrounds, the prolificity, even our somewhat troubled first marriages—gave us areas in common that led to a friendship of a sort.

We saw a good deal of each other in the 1960's, sometimes in Boston (where he lived during that decade) but more often in New York. I came to realize that behind his ebullient facade was a man more troubled than joyous, who hid his unhappiness in vast outpourings of work; he discovered, eventually, that behind my gloomy-looking exterior was a man somewhat less anguished than was commonly believed, though often gloomy enough, who *also* used work as an antidote to unhappiness. We enjoyed each other's company; on those rare moments when he and I were alone with each other, we pulled back our public facades a little, though only a little; we argued good-humoredly over this and that and on two occasions in the 1970's had pretty serious disputes, both of which were eventually resolved in a harmonious and mutually satisfactory way. (One sprang from Isaac's incredulity over my statement in 1974 that I was giving up writing forever—he thought that was a damned silly thing for me to be doing, and said so publicly—and the other was a misunderstanding that sprang from his taking seriously a facetious remark of mine about radioactivity.) We exchanged letters fairly frequently after I moved to California; I commissioned a short story from him for a book I was editing and by so doing indirectly got him back to writing novels after a 15-year hiatus; when my first marriage broke up in the mid-1970's he had some useful things to tell me, having gone through some-

thing similar himself a few years before. Then came a long period when we had only the most occasional contact with each other; and then, through a series of bizarre twists and turns that neither of us could have anticipated, we wandered into a collaborative relationship in which we produced novel-length versions of his three most celebrated novellas, "Nightfall," "The Ugly Little Boy," and "The Bicentennial Man."

(During the writing of which, I often found myself hearkening back to that time forty years before when I had stared in wonder at the author of "Nightfall," looking upon him as some sort of unapproachable demigod. Now I was working within that story myself as though I were he, inhabiting it, rethinking it, developing it. In a weird way I had not only come to know Isaac Asimov but to *be* him. I'd love to send a memo to my adolescent self about that.)

And now he is gone. His death leaves an immense void in our community. He was, of course, a great writer, and an extraordinarily brilliant man, and a remarkably vigorous and stimulating human being. He was also a singular and unforgettable character, a strictly one-of-a-kind person. We are all of us unique—by definition, Isaac would say—but he was (and may God and Isaac forgive me for this violence against our language that I am about to commit) more unique than any of us. Those of you who knew him will know exactly what I mean. I miss him immensely. May he rest in peace, wherever he is—by which I mean, in his case, may he be writing books up there just as fast as he can. ♦

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Letters

When I was a child I would grab *Amazing Stories* as soon as my father put it down, and read it cover to cover. Its influence in my mind was powerful, permanent and positive. I've never quite lost the sense of wonder about the possibilities, nor been able to shut down my imagination in the face of new concepts and images.

On the whole, I am pleased with the new magazine. The illustrations are good and the writing is, in my opinion, of generally high quality. Mostly I prefer hard sf over fantasy, though I'm not at all interested in space wars, which seem to me to be doing the same old thing in a different place. Despite that preference, though, I've enjoyed most of the fantasy. There is one kind of story that someone on your staff seems determined to print one of in each issue—a retelling of some event in history. It seems to me that this kind of story takes no imagination, and I haven't yet read one where the characterization or quality of writing hooked me in despite that. I find them excruciatingly boring, and it annoys me that you waste good space on them. That's my only complaint, though, so keep up the good work.

Sandra Richardson
Madera CA

I recently bought copies of six of the leading SF and fantasy magazines for careful examination. The March 1992 issue of *AMAZING*® Stories was one of those I selected. It was nice to have a magazine free from ink blotches, wood chips, wrinkled pages, and a half-glued binding. (It must be a special property of matter that ink blotches always seek out climax sentences . . . well, nearly always.)

One problem: the shiny pages are a real nuisance. Even when I get the column I'm reading to stop shining, the surrounding areas throw reflections.

I appreciate the effort made to keep a story's body parts together. Bisected limbs carted off to page 34 can destroy a story's fragile essence. One magazine, using a format similar to yours, allows its fancy artwork to force stories to be shuffled around. Artwork should enhance the story—yours does.

Most of the stories were great. I loved "The Devil's Sentrybox" with its subtle humor and consideration for us romantics—the last sentence settled in my tummy like a warm drink of cocoa after twenty minutes of chipping ice from the windshield. David Carr's "In the Company of Machines" is also worth a special thank you.

One exception to your high quality was "The Natural Hack" by Tony Daniel. I thought some nasty person loosened the lid on the salt shaker—I gagged. I tried again the next day. I gagged. Yes, it was an accurate representation of some crude people I've heard speaking. Very crudely gym shorts may accurately represent some sports figures—but would I enjoy placing the brown spot against my nose? I went back and read the story, after I finished the rest of the magazine. Even tuning out the distractions, it wasn't that great.

The book reviews: I wonder how many aspiring authors read them for the hints they provide about good/bad writing? I do. So I appreciate honest, constructive criticism such as John Bunnell's review of *The Orpheus Process*.

While I'm on that subject—how about a column on writing, or perhaps a column from one of the writers sharing a few thoughts on how a particular story in that issue was created?

The "Looking Forward" section surprised me. It was nice to have a thick slice from a book to get a real flavor of the author's style . . . almost like having a few extra stories in the magazine.

Being someone who enjoys (and frequently perpetrates) puns, I'm glad you included "Relativity Disproved at Last." It

was almost too corny, but I enjoyed it. Some of the magazines take themselves too seriously.

Stanley E. Ingertson
Amherst MA


Thank you for the beautiful cover on the March 1992 issue, and for the stories in that issue. Nearly all of them got high grades from me, especially "For a Future You" (Kathleen Ann Goonan), "In the Company of Machines" (David F. Carr), and "Reawakening" (Mark J. McGarry).

No thanks for the silly cover in February. (Was that St. Joan in the foreground?) I'll have to hide it from my friends, who already think I don't have any class.

The stories in the January and February issues were awful. "Bad Brains" (Kathe Koja) would be at home in a Literary Magazine (not a compliment!). "The Flag Burners" (J. A. Pollard) was too long for such a silly premise; "Complications" (Brian Stableford) was an interesting premise that the author did not know how to turn into a story. "Chameleon on a Mirror" (Howard V. Hendrix) was a fine example of nontraditional style (which, however, would have become tedious if it had gone on any longer) . . . but I'm tired of the junkies, thugs and sociopathic punk protagonists that were so common in 80's SF. The only excellent story I found in those two issues was "Death of a God" (J. Robert King).

Re your Asimovian editorial in the March issue: chill out! The poor schlupp who wrote that letter probably looked at their big piece of paper, felt that twenty words weren't enough, and added the meaningless phrase "for your convenience." Sheesh! Not only do we get into trouble for not sending SASE, but now we get into trouble if we send it without the proper humility.

Jess Schilling
Huntingdon PA



the Last Reunion

Harry Turtledove

OFFICIAL PROGRAM
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CONFEDERATE
REUNION

JUNE, 1932

35 CENTS

Illustration by
John & Laura Lakey

The train pulled to a stop. "Richmond!" the conductor shouted. "All out for Richmond!" The man in the long gray coat with the brass buttons slowly got to his feet, made his way down the aisle. A porter walked behind him with his bags. People waited respectfully until he had passed, then began filing out after him.

The conductor touched a finger to the brim of his cap in salute. "Watch your step as you get out, General. Let me give you a hand, sir."

John Houston Thorpe waved away the offered assistance. "If I can't manage a couple of steps, young fellow, you may as well bury me. And I'm no general. I'm proud I was a captain, and I've never claimed anything more."

Taking some of his weight on his stick, he descended from the passenger car without difficulty. Richmond in June was warm and muggy, but so was Rocky Mount, North Carolina, from which he'd come. The weather was not what made his shoulders sag for a moment; it was the weight of the past.

He'd come through Richmond in 1863 with the rest of the Forty-Seventh North Carolina, hot and eager to join Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in the great invasion of the North that would set the Confederacy free forever. He had been dapper and handsome, with slicked-down black hair and a thin little mustache of which he had been inordinately proud.

Now—how had sixty-nine years slid by? Inside, he felt like a dashing youth still. The body that moved only slowly, the thick spectacles, the gnarled hand he often cupped behind one ear—were they truly his? Surely it was the world that had changed, not himself.

A flashbulb exploded in front of his face, filling his vision with purple spots. No flashbulbs when he'd been here before; in those days, having a photograph taken meant standing solemn and statue-still until the long exposure ended. He nodded. Yes, it was the world that had changed.

"Welcome to Richmond, General!" the fellow behind the flash camera shouted. "Have you come here other times since the end of the war?"

"Never once," Thorpe answered, with a sort of pride. "But now, I thought, if I don't come now—when shall I have another chance?"

"What do you think of the city, General?" the man asked.

As his eyes cleared, Thorpe saw the fellow had a PRESS tag tucked into his hand—*a reporter*, then. "I'm no general," he repeated, a bit testily: a reporter was supposed to know such things. "What do I think of Richmond? I've not seen much yet, but it strikes me as a big city. Of course, it did that a while ago, too."

The laugh that once rang musically was now a rusty croak, but he loosed it all the same. When he'd first come north to Richmond, not a town in North Carolina had held as many as five thousand inhabitants; no wonder the Confederate capital, then near forty thousand, seemed to him a metropolis swollen past belief. These days Rocky Mount was on its way to being a city of the size Richmond had been then. He wondered why he failed to find it large. Perhaps because he and Rocky

Mount grew together. But his town had grown up, while he . . . somehow he had just grown old.

From behind him, the porter said, "You come on with me, suh. I'll take you to the cab stand." The colored man picked up his suitcases again, raised his voice: "Make way fo' the General here! Make way, folks!"

And people *did* clear a path. Following in the porter's wake, Thorpe reflected that the illegitimate promotion people insisted on foisting on him was worth something, at any rate, if it got him through the crowded train station so easily. He laughed again.

"What's funny, suh?" the porter asked.

"When I was a soldier here, I doubt the people would have moved aside so readily for any *real* general, save maybe Robert E. Lee, as they do now for me. I led no great armies, only a ragtag company. My only claim to notice is my span of years."

"There's worse ones than that, suh," the porter observed. Thorpe slowly nodded; judging by what he'd seen in the second half of his long life, there were many such worse claims, most of them trumpeted uncommonly loud.

The Negro dropped Thorpe's bags for a moment to stick his fingers in his mouth and give forth with a piercing whistle. A taxi driver waved to show he'd heard. The porter grabbed the suitcases again and headed for the boxy Chevrolet. Behind him, Thorpe made the best speed he could.

Pretty girls paused to stare wide-eyed at him as he went by. He remembered that from his soldier days, too. Then he wouldn't have minded getting some of those girls alone. He fondly remembered a couple of leaves spent in the city's seamier districts. The most respectable girls nowadays showed more rounded flesh than any shameless woman had in his youth, but desire was only a memory, too.

Between them, the porter and the taxi driver tossed his bags into the back seat of the cab. Thorpe dug in his pocket, pulled out a quarter. The porter beamed; a quarter was worth far more in these hard times of 1932 than it had been in the inflation-raddled Richmond of the War Between the States. "God bless you, suh!"

"God bless you, too," Thorpe said. Back in the old days, he would have tipped a slave who served as well as this porter had. Negroes had been free now long enough for a man to go from birth to old age in that span of years—not old age like his own, of course, but age old enough. It hadn't worked out as dreadfully, as long-ago fire-eaters feared it would, so perhaps Lincoln was right all along. Right or not, Lincoln prevailed. The proof of it was that Thorpe couldn't even recall the last time he'd wondered about the justice of emancipation.

"Where to, General?" the taxi driver asked.

"Camp De Saussure, wherever that may be," Thorpe answered. He didn't bother correcting the man. Apparently he was to be a general for the duration, whether he liked it or not. If that was so, he decided he might as well like it. He'd grown used to far worse things over the years.

"That's what they're calling the Lee Camp Soldiers' Home for the reunion," the driver said as he held the car

door open for Thorpe. "In honor of General De Saussure of the United Confederate Veterans, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think so." Thorpe slowly, carefully bent to sit down in the taxi. C. A. De Saussure actually called himself a general because he headed the veterans' organization. Thorpe did not think much of that. All the real generals who'd worn gray (and those who'd worn blue as well) were dead.

The taxi pulled away from the curb. Soon it was tooling along at an effortless thirty-five miles an hour. The John Houston Thorpe who had visited Richmond not far past the midpoint of a vanished century would never have believed such a thing. His great-grandchildren took it utterly for granted: to them, a horseback ride was an hour's amusement at a fair, not the only way to go from one place to another. Thorpe himself rarely thought about automobiles these days. This afternoon, though, he was seeing new things in an old mirror.

The driver had his window open to bring in the breeze. Thorpe was half-dozing until a loud roar overhead jerked him back to full awareness. "Damned airplanes," the taxi man said. "They fly so low sometimes, one of 'em'll come right down in the middle of traffic one fine day, mark my words."

Thorpe didn't answer. The taxi driver was young; men had likely been flying his whole life. To Thorpe, cars were wonderful and useful, but easy enough to take in stride. At airplanes he would never cease to marvel if he lived another ninety-odd years. He felt quiet pride that the very first one had left the ground less than a hundred miles from where he lived.

As the reporter had done, the driver asked him whether he'd been in Richmond since the States War. When he answered no, the fellow said, "Bet it's changed a fair bit since then."

"That it has," Thorpe said. "In those days there wasn't a paved road in Richmond, the town was either full of mud or full of dust, the flies swarmed fit to drive a man mad, and everything smelled of horse manure." He chuckled to watch the taxi driver's jaw drop. "Every town, South and North, was like that then, though I don't suppose it gets into the history books. They didn't have flush toilets in those days, either. You're lucky to be a young man in such a marvelous time."

The Chevrolet was from new; its springs had seen better days. Nevertheless, on the asphalted highway it rode smoother than any carriage over dirt. Thorpe tried to imagine what a carriage would have felt like had he whipped a two-horse team up anywhere close to the speed he was making now. Pointless effort—a carriage at full tilt would have overturned the second it hit a stone or a pothole.

"But the glory then—" the driver began.

Thorpe broke in: "No glory to dying in camp of smallpox or measles or scarlet fever. No glory to typhoid, either, or to perishing of fever after your wound went bad—and it would, for we had no medicines. No glory to having your arm cut off and tossed on a pile outside a tent or under a tree while the surgeon shouted, 'Next!' No, sir, don't speak to me of glory."

The taxi driver chewed on that for the next couple of minutes, as if it were a piece of meat stuck between his teeth. At last he said, hesitantly now, "General, if that's how you feel, why did you come?"

"To see the men who went through it with me one last time before I die," Thorpe said. "No one who didn't can possibly imagine what it was like." True enough, as far as it went, but Thorpe wondered if it went far enough. Take away the remembered dirt and pain and hunger and terror and something remained behind, something that had drawn him from Rocky Mount after all these years. He scorned the idea of glory, as most men will who have seen war face to face. But something was there, even if he didn't care to try to name it for a taxi driver.

The taxi stopped in front of the Soldiers' Home: low cottages on greensward, with a few bigger buildings among them: a hospital, a dining hall, a chapel. The driver got out, opened Thorpe's door for him, and hauled his bags off the back seat.

"What is the fare?" Thorpe asked.

"Thirty-five cents, General, anywhere inside Richmond city limits."

"When I was here last, young man, this was far to the west of the city limits." The first coin that came into Thorpe's hands was a half-dollar. "Here you are. I have no need for change."

"Thank you, General!" Smiling, the taxi driver carried the suitcases toward a cottage with a large sign in front of it: WELCOME, CONFEDERATE VETERANS.

A colored man standing by the door hurried forward. "Here, I'll take charge of those, suh," he told the driver, who relinquished the bags, nodded to Thorpe, and hurried back toward his automobile. The colored man held the cottage door open. "You go right on in, General, so as they can get your name and figure out which cottage you belong in. We'll make you right comfortable here, I promise you that."

"I'm certain of it," Thorpe said. Through the door, he saw several old men (several *other* old men, he reminded himself) in gray suits talking with some younger folks who sat behind tables and shuffled through file boxes. He got in line behind one of the veterans.

The fellow turned around. His beard was bushy and white, but his eyebrows had somehow stayed black as coal. He chuckled rheumily. "Might as well be waitin' my turn at mess call. Makes me think I really am back in the army after all."

"Yes, I remember that," Thorpe said. Those four words were plenty to push him back in time, to make him smell the cookfires, hear the chatter of men around him, even to taste the hot cornbread that had been so much of what he ate for so long.

He got to the head of this line sooner than he usually had at mess call—but then, so many fewer men were here now. One of the young men asked his name, went through a box marked T-Z, pulled out a badge. "You'll be in Cottage C, General Thorpe. Pick any vacant bed there. I hope you enjoy your stay. Do you need help pinning that on, sir?"

"No, thank you." Thorpe proceeded to prove it. "The rheumatism doesn't have hold of me too badly. Cottage C, you said?"

"That's right, General. It's also on your badge below your name, in case—" The young fellow thought twice. "Well, just in case."

In case you forget, he'd started to say. Thorpe declined to take offense. So many men his age had wits that began to wander. His, though, so far as he knew, were still sound. He'd written the history of his regiment, back around the turn of the century, and only a handful of years had passed since he'd compiled a roster of men from Nash and Edgecombe Counties who'd served in the Forty-Seventh North Carolina. Now he thought he was the only soldier of his regiment left alive.

The colored man—one of the helpers at the Soldiers' Home, no doubt—was still waiting when Thorpe came back outside. "Cottage C, is it?" he said, reading the badge. "You just follow me, General. It's not far."

Thorpe followed. In the old days, teaching a Negro to read had been against the law. Some had thought blacks too stupid to learn, anyhow. Obviously, they hadn't known everything there was to know.

The beds in the cottage proved to be steel-framed army cots, with scratchy woolen blankets and stiffly starched sheets and pillowcases. Thorpe chose one by the window, to get the benefit of whatever breeze there might be. "Sorry we can't put you folks up in higher style, General," the attendant said as he set down the suitcases. "Most of the time, though, there's just a dozen or so old soldiers in the Home, and we got seven, eight hundred of you all comin' to visit."

"Don't worry," Thorpe said. "Every man of us here will have known worse accommodations than these, I promise you." He looked at his army cot. In his army days, no such creature existed. He'd slept on pine boughs piled in a frame, rolled in his blanket (a far more ragged and threadbare specimen than the one on the cot), or just on bare ground. And even a pillow! Back then, such had been undreamed-of luxury.

The colored man declined a tip—"This here's my job, suh"—and hurried away to help some other newly arrived veteran settle in. Thorpe left the clapboard cottage, too, and walked slowly over to the dining hall. It wasn't yet supper time, but several veterans were in there passing time with a deck of cards. A couple of them paused between hands to squirt jets of tobacco juice at a spattered spittoon.

Looking at the white beards, the bald heads, the gnarled fingers, Thorpe wondered why he had come. Wasn't it better to remember the men who'd fought under the Stars and Bars as young and dashing and brave rather than seeing what time had done to them—and to him? Then someone tapped him on the shoulder. "Hello, stranger. You look like you could do with a nip of something better'n water."

Thorpe turned. Of course the man behind him was wrinkled and old. Everyone here was wrinkled and old. But the fellow looked alert and cheerful; in fact, behind gold-rimmed spectacles, his eyes held a gleam that said

he'd likely been a prime forager when he wore the gray in earnest.

"A nip, eh?" Thorpe said. "I have been wondering where I might find one, not being from these parts." Prohibition didn't stop drinking, but made it harder to get started in a town where you didn't know somebody.

The other veteran set a finger alongside his nose, then produced a silver flask from a waistcoat pocket. "Help yourself, but leave enough for me, too."

The whisky wasn't very good, but Thorpe had drunk whisky that wasn't very good for a great many years. He squinted at the other man's badge. "I am in your debt, Mr., uh, Ledbetter. What unit, if I may ask?"

"Army of Northern Virginia, Eighth Alabama. Call me Jed."

"I'm John, then. You fought in Hill's corps, too? I was Forty-Seventh North Carolina, Henry Heth's corps. You were in Mahone's, am I right?"

"So I was, by God. Your memory still works, John. So does mine, even if my pecker don't. Yeah, I was there for all of it . . . aah, hell, not quite; the Yankees caught me two days before Appomattox."

"I stayed with it till the end," Thorpe said. Then he fell silent. Even after a span of years close to the biblical three score and ten, some memories remained sharp enough to wound.

Ledbetter let him be, as any of the veterans would have. After a while he said, "Well, it ain't what we wanted it to be back then, but it ain't too bad, neither."

Thorpe nodded gratefully; that much was true. Ledbetter changed the subject a little: "I got in here last night, and they feed you royal, that they do. If we'd had rations like these when we were in the field, we'd've *won* that goddamn war, no doubt about it."

"I was thinking the same thing about the beds," Thorpe said.

Ledbetter's laughter was not a croak, but the hearty cackle of a laying hen. "John, you have that one dead on, and I'm not jokin'. Why, I remember the time I had to sleep in a tree four nights runnin'. That weren't the worst of it, neither. I . . ." The story went on for some time. Thorpe believed not a word of it.

He suspected most of the old men here had stories like that. Several of the poker players wore coats studded with badges from so many past reunions that they looked like field marshals from some Balkans army better at bragging than fighting. Their yarns would have grown in the telling every time they were trotted out, too. By now, few would resemble anything that had actually happened.

Jed Ledbetter shuffled off toward the bathroom. Thorpe stood around for a while, watching the men playing cards. Sure enough, they had stories by the trainful. As the shadows lengthened, one of them got up and turned on the electric lights. In the old days, Thorpe thought, it would have been an oil lamp or a candle, and endless eyestrain. No one else seemed to notice the change from then to now.

Again he'd wondered why he'd come, what he had in common with these garrulous oldsters. The only answer

he could find was that the war had defined their lives, as it had his. He'd been with them at their beginnings; seeing them at the end of things seemed fitting, too.

"Generals, please," a woman in nurse's whites called over and over till she had the veterans' attention. "We need you to go out for a little while so we can set the room up for supper."

Thorpe left without complaint. The poker players followed more slowly, grumbling all the way. He smiled. That took him back across the years. Some of the men in his company had left their cards back in camp when they went into battle, so as not to have to explain the devil's pasteboards to St. Peter if they got killed. But others, like these old fellows, would sooner have played than eaten.

As six o'clock drew near, more and more veterans gathered on the grass outside the dining hall. Quite a few of them had flasks, which they weren't shy in sharing. After three or four had gone by, Thorpe began to feel merry. He joined in the cheer—not quite a real Rebel yell, but close—when the doors opened. As if at one of those long-ago mess calls, the men formed a single line as they filed in.

Since he didn't know anyone here, Thorpe took a seat at random. He found himself across the table from Jed Ledbetter. The Alabaman grinned at him, displaying tobacco-stained false teeth. "Was I right, John, or what? Ain't this fine-lookin' grub?"

"That it is, Jed." Thorpe meant it—platters of ham and chicken alternated with bowls full of green salad, peas, and mashed potatoes and gravy. Along with the unofficial liquids lurking in hip flasks, there were milk and Coca-Cola and ice water. He filled his plate full. He was eating better here than he had lately done in Rocky Mount. Times were no less hard there than anywhere else in the country.

He heard so much talk of Pickett's Charge and what might have been at Gettysburg that he couldn't help himself. "Don't you forget Pettigrew's boys," he said at last. "We went up the hill on Pickett's left, and a whole great lot of us never came down again."

Maybe he'd touched glory then. He wasn't quite sure. He did remember being too excited to be afraid, even when the Federal guns on the flank tore great bleeding holes in the tight gray ranks.

Somebody said, "Reckon they call it Pickett's Charge on account of his fellas got to the top o' the hill and in amongst the Yankees, and Pettigrew's didn't."

"One of the reasons they got to the top is we shielded them most of the way with our bodies," Thorpe retorted hotly. Then he stopped, amazed at the anger he could still feel sixty-nine years after the fact. He managed a laugh. "It's water under the bridge now, that's for certain."

"So it is," the other veteran answered, "and bodies under the ground, too." The whole table fell silent for a moment then. That shot landed too close for comfort. Almost all the bodies were under the ground by now, and the ones that weren't—those at this reunion, for instance—would be soon.

Though tired, Thorpe found he wasn't sleepy. Along

with dozens of other veterans, he sat in the dining hall for hours after supper was done, drinking coffee (some of it spiked), smoking, and listening to and telling tales. As his regiment's historian, he knew a lot of them. The ordinary passing of day and night seemed far away.

"It's always like this at these things," said a graybeard with a chestful of reunion badges. "When you're with your own kind, you want to spend all the time you can on doin' and talkin'. Your bed'll always be there."

And you won't, Thorpe thought. Now that he was here, he wished he'd started coming to reunions long ago. Well, that was water under the bridge, too.

A few at a time, the old men slipped out of the hall and made for their cottages. A little past midnight, someone made a horrifying discovery in his program book. He clambered up onto a chair and, teetering dangerously, waved his arms and waited for quiet. When he got it, he said loudly, "There's gonna be a God-damned band playin' us God-damned reveille at seven o' clock in the God-damned mornin' tomorrow. They must think we're still in the God-damned war."

Assisted by two of his comrades, he descended from his perch. The dining hall emptied quickly after that. Thorpe's ears were not what they had been, but he didn't think he could sleep through a band's worth of reveille.

Sure enough, at seven sharp the music blared out. Along with the rest of the men in Cottage C, Thorpe dressed and returned to the dining hall. This time, he made a point of finding Jed Ledbetter. The Alabaman looked up, grinned his yellowed grin, then resumed his attack on a plate of bacon and eggs.

Thorpe had been reading his own program book. He said, "I don't mind getting up early today, because the morning's event is the United Confederate Veterans' business meeting."

Ledbetter grinned again, evilly. "An' you reckon you'll just doze right through it, you mean?"

"It has to be easier than sleeping in a tree, don't you think?" Thorpe asked, deadpan.

"Remind me to watch out for you, John," Ledbetter said. "You may be a quiet one, but you got yourself a devil hidin' there inside."

The two veterans sat side by side on the bus that took them to the Mosque Auditorium at Sixth and Laurel. Confederate battle flags flew everywhere in Richmond. A forest of them waved in front of the Mosque; an enormous one was stretched behind the speaker's platform. The building's ceiling fans stirred the thick air but did little to cool it.

The introductions of aged UCV dignitaries by other aged UCV dignitaries went on and on. Some of them seemed hardly more lively than Stonewall Jackson's horse Old Sorrel, whose stuffed carcass was on display back at the Soldiers' Home. As he'd thought he might, Thorpe dozed through the speeches. Every so often, his head would fall forward onto his chest and wake him; in those moments, he saw he was far from the only old soldier having trouble staying awake.

After lunch, the Confederate veterans filed onto the

buses that took them across town for the dedication of the Richmond Battlefield Parks. They rolled east along the section of Franklin Street called Monument Avenue, past the memorials to Matthew Fontaine Maury, to Jackson, to Jefferson Davis, to Lee, and to Jeb Stuart. Thorpe hadn't been with the Army of Northern Virginia for the Seven Days Campaign, whose sites took up much of the Battlefield Parks, but he'd fought at Cold Harbor two years later, holding Grant's men away from the Confederate capital.

His bus was one of the first to arrive, so he got a spot near the speakers' stand. A solidly built, dark-haired U. S. Army colonel was leaning down and shaking hands with a good number of veterans. "Who's he?" Thorpe asked.

"Let's have us a look." Jed Ledbetter checked his program. Behind his thick reading glasses, his eyes widened. "God damn me if it ain't U. S. Grant III."

Thorpe waited to hear no more, but began trying to make his way through the crowd. It wasn't easy; too many other ex-Rebels had the same idea. But at last he got to clasp hands with the Federal commander's grandson and namesake. "Thank you for coming here, sir," he said.

"I'm pleased to do it," Colonel Grant answered. "I wasn't sure what kind of reception I'd get, seeing what my name is, but everyone's been very kind."

"Your grandfather was doing the job he thought right, sir; so were the men who fought for him," Thorpe answered. "We knew that then and we know it now. Nothing could have shown it better than his kindness and theirs at Appomattox, when the Federals fed us and let us keep our horses and mules."

"He always felt you Southern men were doing the same, and doing it bravely," Grant said. "We always were brothers, even when we fought."

"Yes," Thorpe said. By then, though, Colonel Grant had turned to another old soldier. Thorpe went back to his place without resentment. Just the opposite: that a Grant would come here to pay tribute to his grandfather's former foes said all that needed saying about reconciliation between North and South.

Perhaps not quite all; Jed Ledbetter played the part of the unreconstructed Rebel. "I won't shake his hand," he said when Thorpe had returned from the bunting-draped platform. "I wouldn't have shook his grandpappy's hand, neither. General? Ha! He just kept throwin' bluecoats at us till he wore us to death, is all."

"They were brave men, too," Thorpe said. "When they came across the open country at us here at Cold Harbor, shooting them felt like murder." He paused a moment in surprise and realization. "I expect they felt the same about us, the third day at Gettysburg."

"Didn't stop 'em," Ledbetter growled. Then he made a sour face. "All right, John, I see your point. God damn if I have to like it, though."

As the afternoon's speeches wore on, a couple of Confederate veterans passed out from the heat. But doctors and nurses were at the ready, and soon revived them. Thorpe noticed that Jed Ledbetter clapped as loud as anyone else after Colonel Grant spoke. In fact, the colonel got the loudest hand of the afternoon.

Ledbetter pulled out a pocket watch as the old soldiers reboarded the buses. "We better be back by six," he said. "Somebody'll pay hell if I miss 'Amos 'n' Andy' on the radio." He sounded much fiercer at that moment than he had when he was grumbling about General Grant. Several men echoed him, some profanely. But the organizing committee had taken into account the nearly universal passion for the show: no reunion events were scheduled while it was on.

Fortunately, the buses did return on time. Thorpe listened to "Amos 'n' Andy" along with everyone else in his cottage, then went to dinner, and then to the Mosque for a reception honoring the veterans. To his surprise, he actually got asked a sensible question there. A man in his middle thirties came up and said, "Sir, do you think what you went through was as hard as the fighting in France?"

"That's a hard question to answer, young fellow. You were Over There?" Thorpe asked. The man nodded. Thorpe watched his eyes go distant and watchful; yes, he'd seen the elephant. The Confederate veteran said, "We weren't up against the big cannon and the machine guns and the gas, as you boys were, but we didn't have your supply train or your doctors, either. War's hard any which way, I expect."

"True enough." The Great War soldier nodded again. "Thank you, General."

Thorpe stayed away from the next day's business meetings at the Mosque. Talking with the assembled veterans at the Soldiers' Home was more enjoyable. When he let out that he'd been a captain, a lot of them gave him a hard time; most, in those days, had been youths with no rank to their name.

At one point that afternoon, he asked Jed Ledbetter to move so he could get past him and go to the bathroom. Ledbetter sprang to his feet with alarming spryness. "Yes sir, Captain, sir!" he cried, coming to a brace surely stiffer than any he'd used back in his soldier days.

Thorpe looked around at the grinning veterans. "If it's all the same to you gents, I think I'd sooner be demoted back to General so I can be like everybody else," he said. Amidst raucous laughter, the rest of the Confederate soldiers gave him his wish.

Around four, Ledbetter got up and left the talk of old battles won and old battles lost. "I'm gonna take me a nap," he announced when a couple of eyebrows went up. "I wanna be at my best fo' the ball tonight, do some fancy steppin' with the pretty young things."

Thorpe looked forward to the dance, too, but the talk was even better, with names that echoed across the decades like far-off musketry. Some he'd been through: Gettysburg and the Wilderness, Cold Harbor and Appomattox. Some were from before the days when the Forty-Seventh North Carolina joined Lee's army: Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville. And some came from the west: Shiloh, Stone's Mountain, Vicksburg.

One white-haired Texan had fought at Palmito Ranch, more than a month after the surrender at Appomattox. "Yeah, we whupped the Yankees," he said, "but if we'd've knowed y'all had done give up, we wouldn't've bothered."

Jed Ledbetter came back to the dining hall in time for supper. He made a point of sitting by Thorpe for the trip to the ball at the Grays' Armory. As the bus rattled down the street, they exchanged addresses. "Sure, I'll write to you, John," Ledbetter said. "What the hell else I got to do all day?" He cackled laughter.

A flask came by. Thorpe sipped from it, passed it to his new friend. He said, "We can put all we've got into the dance tonight, seeing as we'll be in cars for the grand parade tomorrow."

"I heard told about that," Ledbetter said, nodding. "Don't know as I like it much. I marched in plenty o' these down through the years." He paused, loosed that cackle of his again. "Course, I was younger then."

The ballroom swept Thorpe back to the days when he'd been younger, much younger. Had the girls been in crinolines and hoop skirts that swept the floor, had the gallants been without gray beards and canes, the scene might have been one from his first stay in Richmond, all those years before.

The moment the music started, he even forgot his comrades' ages. Most of them forgot too, swinging their partners through the Grand March as if they were going off to battle in the morning. Several of the young ladies exclaimed in pleasure; they might not have expected the old soldiers to have so much vim left.

No sooner had that idea crossed Thorpe's mind than a girl behind him let out an indignant squeak and said, "Why, General, you forget yourself!"

"No, miss—I remember, by God!" the veteran retorted.

Fiddlers played tunes that went back to the War Between the States. Thorpe discovered his feet still knew how to jig. He was out of breath and his heart pounded heavily in his chest when the music stopped, but the applause from his partner (a very pretty little strawberry blonde, about the age of his oldest great-granddaughter) made him resolve him to dance all night.

The American Legion band played square dance music. Thorpe felt lighter on his feet than he had in thirty years, maybe more. He knew he was cutting a sprightly figure. Some of the veterans wilted as the evening went on and retired to the sidelines, but he stayed out on the floor, just as he'd told himself he would.

"General, shouldn't you take a rest?" asked the blonde girl (her name, he'd learned, was Marjorie).

He shook his head. "Miss, I haven't so many nights of dancing left in me that I can afford to waste even part of one."

Marjorie's smile displayed small, even white teeth. "All right, General, since you put it that way, let's cut us a rug!"

Thorpe was one of the last veterans still dancing when the band played "Dixie." The armory echoed with shouts and cheers and old men's voices cracking as they tried to turn loose Rebel yells. Thorpe yelled with the best of them, pumped his fist in the air.

Marjorie stared, wide-eyed, not just at him but at all the old soldiers; maybe, just for a moment, she too saw them as they'd been so long ago. Emboldened by that thought, Thorpe leaned forward and pecked her on the

cheek. She smiled and squeezed his hands between hers. "Thank you, General," she said. "I've enjoyed this evening much more than I thought I would."

"So have I, Miss Marjorie," he said. "Oh, I'm tired, I'll not deny, but I don't grudge a minute of it."

But when, a little past midnight, he got into a night-shirt and pulled back the covers on his steel cot, he felt a dull pain in the left side of his ribcage. He curled his lip in mild scorn at the weakness of his flesh. Though he hadn't done so much in years, he was sure he'd be fine come morning. He lay down, prayed briefly, and fell asleep.

He awoke in darkness, amid old men's snores. The pain was back, and suddenly seemed big as the world. He sat up, started to get out of bed . . .

Thorpe looked down at the cuff of his gray coat. It bore the double twist of braid that showed captain's rank. He looked at the hand protruding from the cuff. The flesh was smooth and unspotted, the tendons no longer up-raised like old tree roots pushing through thin soil.

He had no time for surprise. He and the rest of the men in gray and butternut and occasional looted Yankee blue hurried through the cover afforded by a stand of old pine woods. The trees thinned ahead. He could see the line of the Weldon Railroad, the burned ruins of what had been Reams Station south of Petersburg, the low parapet the Federals had thrown up twenty or thirty yards east of the train tracks.

"Keep your ranks, boys," he called to the men of Company A. The troopers of the Chicora Guards just grinned and nodded. They'd been through enough fights to know what to do without being told.

The Federals held their fire, no doubt waiting for their foes to reach a point from which they would be unable to get away cheaply. Suddenly, from not far behind Thorpe, Brigadier General William McRae shouted, "Don't fire a gun now, but dash for the enemy."

The soldiers in gray traded grim looks. If McRae's ploy failed, they were the ones who would pay the butcher's bill. No choice, though, but to obey. Drawing his Army Colt, Thorpe cried "Forward!" and ran to the attack at the head of his company.

The Rebels burst out of the pine woods yelling like fiends. The Northern soldiers yelled, too, in surprise and alarm. Muzzle flashes stabbed outward from the parapet, thick clouds of black-powder smoke rose above it.

A Minie ball cracked past Thorpe's head. Confederate soldiers fell, screaming and writhing in pain. But the charge was across only a couple of hundred yards of ground. Since the Rebels did not pause to fire and reload their muskets—always deadly dangerous out in the open—they drew near the parapet before too many of them fell.

Thorpe tripped on a crossbie as he ran across the railroad track. He stumbled, almost fell, caught himself just in time. Then he was at the low Federal earthwork. A man in blue scrambled up to meet him, thrust with his bayoneted Springfield. Thorpe fired the Colt pistol at point-blank range. The Federal wailed and reeled backward, clutching his belly.

Other Southern men were up on the Union works now, too, some fighting hand to hand, others shooting down into the trenches behind the parapet. Some blue-coats fired back, but more threw down their guns and threw up their hands in token of surrender.

The cheering Confederates swarmed forward. A ragged private seized a flag from a color-bearer who seemed too stunned to stop him. A glum Federal who wore a major's shoulder straps on the plain blue blouse of a private turned to Thorpe and said, "Captain, your men fight well; that was a magnificent charge."

"Thank you, sir," Thorpe said, nodding to his courteous captive.

The Rebels began hustling more prisoners off to the rear. They must have bagged a couple of thousand Yankees, Thorpe thought proudly. But the cost was not light. Men of the Chicora Guards who'd seemed to have charmed lives all through the company's hard fighting were down now, dead or wounded. No doubt the story was the same all through the Forty-Seventh North Carolina. The surgeons would be busy tonight.

Thorpe peered east. The Federals not hit or captured were abandoning their works and retreating in that direction. They wouldn't tear up any more of the Weldon Railroad here, not for a good while to come; Confederate cavalry—Wade Hampton's boys—galloped up from the south to speed the Yankees on their way.

The rattle of gunfire slowed to a lethargic *pop-pop-pop*, finally petered out. Thorpe glanced back over his shoulder. The sun was almost down. Hard to believe the fighting had lasted most of the day. In the midst of the action from the moment it began, he'd had no time to think . . . about what he was doing here at Reams Station, about how he'd returned to August 1864, to his youth, again.

"That's over," he said to no one in particular. "All over."

"So it is," agreed the Union major, who somehow hadn't gone back with the rest of the prisoners. "So it is—in a way. Welcome, John. We've been waiting for you a long time; you're one of the last to join the ranks."

Under the orange light of the setting sun, dead and

injured men of both sides, their wounds suddenly vanished, sprang to their feet and went around slapping one another on the back. "That was a good shot you nailed me with, Eb." "Just luck, Willie, just luck. Fact is, I was aiming for Joseph there next to you."

Proud, bullet-torn battle flags from North and South fluttered together in the evening breeze. Under them, the men of both sides gathered, all sound and well as they had been before the battle started. "I got me some good coffee here," a Yankee announced. "Who'll swap me some baccy for it?" A Rebel stepped forward, smiling, to make the trade.

Thorpe stared, not fully understanding, not yet. The Northern major touched him on the forearm. "Did it not seem real, John?" he asked quietly. "Was it not as in the old days?"

Then Thorpe knew, beyond any doubt. "Yes, by God, it was," he said.

He woke next morning in a shelter tent he shared with Benjamin Bunn and George Westray. The lieutenants were already up, and bent over a chessboard. They set the game aside to go out with him and take morning roll for the company. He smiled as he walked in front of the drawn-up men. So many faces he hadn't seen in so many years!

After the roll was taken, the Chicora Guards lined up for mess call, and then for drill. Before they could begin their evolutions, though, the drummer began the monotonous patter that summoned soldiers gray and blue to battle. "Dismissed to get your war gear!" Thorpe called. Cheering, the men trotted back to their tents and bedrolls, snatched up rifles and cartridge boxes.

Thorpe followed, a little more slowly. He wondered which fight it would be today.

"Poor old John," Jed Ledbetter said as the hearse pulled away from the Soldiers' Home. He took off his hat, held it over his heart. "Poor old John. He went and missed the grand parade." ♦

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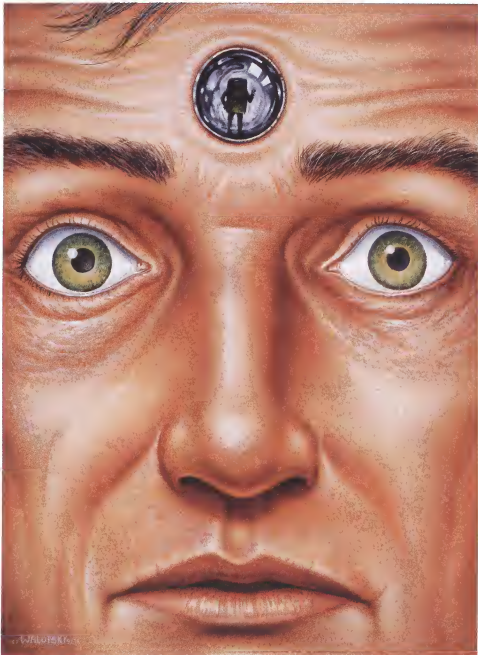
Little Brother's Turn to Watch

Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.

****It's six A.M., Senator Maiter. Time to wake up. Six A.M., Senator. Wake up. Six A.M., Senator. Rise and shine. Six A.M., Senator. Come on, get up. Six A.M., Senator. ON YOUR FEET, YOU LAZY SLUG!****

Christopher Howlen Maiter rolled over, blinked at the clock on the nightstand, and slowly completed his daily climb into consciousness. Though a good man, a sincere man, he woke up cranky. "Dammit, J. Edgar Hoover, I told you not to shout at me."

****Correction, Senator.**** The "voice," whisper-soft but woodenly uninflected, welled up inside his skull, from the microchip implanted just behind his forehead. ****Your instructions of**



28 July 2008 read, in full, "Do not use Phrase 5 unless I do not respond to Phrases 1 through 4, each preceded by a statement of the correct time."*

"Phrase 5?"

**ON YOUR FEET, YOU LAZY SLUG!*

"Oh. Right." Maiter fumbled his long legs over the edge of the bed and touched the floor tentatively, with one toe, like a swimmer testing the water. "J. Edgar"—he yawned—"remind me why I wanted a six A.M. wake-up call."

The proposal to repeal the 30th Amendment comes before the full Senate for a vote this morning, sir.

Memory thus refreshed, he came wide awake. Oh, he would not miss this vote, nor would he abstain from the subsequent ratification campaign, as he had when the constitutional convention to propose a balanced budget amendment had gone berserk and drawn up a few more. He—and most of the federal government—had viewed the 30th as a bad joke. Who could have expected thirty-eight state legislatures to take it seriously?

Ah, but why blame them for anything but political cowardice? They had only done what their constituents clamored for them to do.

No, the fault lay with the Founding Fathers, with the authors of the Constitution. That damn Article 5—"The Congress . . . on the application of the legislatures of two-thirds of the several states, shall call a convention for proposing amendments. . . ."

Insanity, pure insanity. It left the entire government subject to the whims of common people who knew nothing about the difficulty involved in managing a country as large and as complex as America. So naturally you wound up with an idiocy like the 30th as the law of the land.

The 30th had to go. And would, if he could help it. The removal of J. Edgar Hoover and the surveillance apparatus would restore his privacy. His peace of mind. And perhaps his marriage. . . . Otherwise he would have to retire. Let one of those spineless state legislators who had voted for it take his place.

Tugging up his pajama pants, he padded barefoot across the shag rug to the bathroom mirror. Tall and gangly—"Lincolnesque," the reporters called him—he had piercing blue eyes and an engaging smile that re-produced perfectly on campaign posters.

The expert system software package called 'J. Edgar Hoover' said, **Sir, your hair is obscuring the camera lens.**

He finger-brushed the strand of thin brown hair away from the small metal eye in the middle of his forehead. "Is that better?"

Yes, sir.

He had never understood why J. Edgar insisted on a clear view of Maiter's morning ablutions—what crime could he possibly commit, alone in his bathroom all foggy groggy from insufficient sleep?—but he never failed to comply. When J. Edgar couldn't see, it bitched so loudly that Maiter couldn't think.

A housefly buzzed past. Annoyed, he glanced at the window, which he had left open for ventilation. Damn.

The screen must have come loose and fallen out during the night. Well, it could wait.

He opened the shower stall and reached for the faucets. If he turned the water on now, it would have hit the right temperature by the time he was ready to step into it.

A hand grabbed his wrist.

It was so unexpected that for a moment he didn't notice it—or, rather, he did notice it, but refused to accept it, because dreams often linger through the minutes after awakening, and what Senator Maiter dreamed of more than anything was hands—grasping, greedy, grubby hands—giving, shaking, taking hands—hands that—

—hid in the shower stall to seize his wrist? No way.

"J. Edgar—"

You have not committed a crime, Senator.

"How do, Senator?" The stall door rolled back, revealing someone encased in a shiny box that enclosed him from the top of his head to halfway down his blue-jeaned thighs. Tanned, hairy arms emerged from the sides; smoky lenses served as eyeholes. The intruder held a gun—a very large one, it seemed, with a silencer attached—and aimed it at Maiter's midsection. "I'm afraid you won't be able to shower this morning." He released Maiter's wrist.

Maiter sat on the nearest seat available. And stood up at once, for the night before he had forgotten to lower the lid. "What in the name of God—"

"Oh. Sorry. This"—he patted his metalloid integument—"is the very latest in lightweight armor fabric, stretched over a frame of my own design." He had a young voice, nasally high and arrogant.

"J. Edgar!"

You have not committed a crime, Senator.

"I know that, dammit! What about him?"

Possible offenses: trespassing, breaking and entering, armed robbery, possession of an unregistered firearm—

"Stop," said Maiter.

"Sorry," said the intruder. "Can't stop. We have things to do, places to go, people to see. So let's get a move on."

"J. Edgar, sound the alarm."

The man chuckled, a sound hollowed and muted by his shell. "That won't do any good, Senator, but if it makes you feel better, go right ahead."

"What's this all about?"

"I'll explain later."

Maiter folded his arms across his bare chest, and wished he had the biceps for the gesture. "I'm not moving till I get an explanation."

The intruder's right hand twitched to one side; he pulled the trigger.

Silenced though it was, the report reverberated in the bathroom. Dust puffed from a punctured wall tile. Maiter realized abruptly that he needed to use the toilet without delay.

"Would that provide explanation enough, Senator?"

"Yes, I, um . . . uh-huh."

**Senator Maiter, this is Melissa McGaughan of Operation Overview; J. Edgar just sounded your alarm. I'm patching into its video feed now— Christ! Is that *real*?*

"I've been kidnapped," he said.

The intruder said, "Has the supervisor come on line?" He nodded.

"Ah, modern technology. Isn't it wonderful? How do, supervisor? Before the SWAT teams charge through the front door, they ought to know this get-up will deflect anything up to and including an armor-piercing shell, so if they open fire, there's a good chance the ricochets will get the senator before one of them gets me. Your second order of business is to patch the networks into the senator's video. Let's give America a chance to see freedom fighters in action from the inside."

"Senator, McGaughan here. Tell him I can't do that."
"Can't do what?"

"Patch in the networks. It's illegal."

He looked at the kidnapper. "What do I call you?"

"Try 'sir.'"

"Uh-huh. The supervisor says she can't patch in the networks."

"You mean the American public won't get to see *this*?" Slowly he raised his right hand until the barrel of the gun looked Maiter right in the eye. He drew back the hammer with his thumb. "Could that be what you mean, Senator?"

"Glumph." He realized then, with a sudden blinding clarity reminiscent of the Zen *satori*, that not only was he no longer master of his own destiny, he was probably not even a deckhand, and about all he could do was go out with grace. "Say. What kind of gun is that?"

"What?"

"This? A .38 caliber revolver. Why?"

"Oh, just making conversation while the supervisor comes to her senses. I mean, I can't *make* her patch in the networks; all I can do is give her permission, you know? And maybe, um, food for thought? Like, say, what would happen to me if your trigger finger there were to tighten up?"

The man made a noise that could have been one of amusement. "You want the long or the short of it, Senator?"

"I think we can guess the short of it. How about the long?"

"Well. The bullet will enter your skull between the eyes, an inch below the microcam lens. If they tape at high speed, they ought to get a good picture of the approaching projectile on instant replay. Then, well, that's pretty much it for you, Senator, and for the recording, because the bullet will tunnel through your brain, blow a hole in the back of your skull the size of, say, a fist, spatter blood and bone and brains all over the tiles, and bury itself in the wall behind you. Is that graphic enough for the supervisor?"

"I certainly hope so. Ms. McGaughan?"

"Patching in the networks now, Senator."

"She changed her mind."

The intruder's left hand pressed a button on the outside of the armor. From within came a muffled chatter. "Well, Senator, you are indeed on the air. Or rather, I am. Is this . . . yeah. CBS. Hi, Mom!" He waved. "All right, now that we've got live coverage, we can get moving. First, let me tell the authorities this: I've got a four-inch

TV inside with me, and if this show gets preempted, so does the senator. All right everybody? Places, please. Senator, grab a bathrobe and let's go."

Maiter took the robe off the hook on the bathroom door, belted it around his waist, and cast a longing glance at the toilet. Then, realizing that what he faced, all of America saw, he jerked his head around and preceded the kidnapper out of the bathroom.

"Get your car keys."

"They're in my pants." He gestured to the other side of the bedroom.

"Get them." The man stepped clumsily aside. "But don't try anything stupid, okay?"

"I wouldn't think of it." The pants lay in a heap on the chair beside the rumpled bed. As he picked them up and reached into the right-hand pocket, he realized that millions and millions of people—among them, those of his constituents who were not in bed at 3:00 A.M. Pacific Daylight Time—were about to walk through his house with him. And the maid wasn't due for another day. He stifled a groan, pulled out the keys, and wondered if the intruder would mind exiting through the bedroom window. Probably wouldn't fit. But oh God, the kitchen! Five days worth of beer cans and pizza boxes and dirty dishes piled high in the sink. . . . What the hell. The 30th had taken all the fun out of the job, anyway. He held up the keys and jingled them. "Now what?"

"Those fit the car in the garage?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go, then."

Maiter led the way out of the bedroom, down the hall, through the kitchen (looking resolutely toward the ceiling as he walked), and into the attached garage. "You want the garage door open?"

"Not yet. Just the light, if you'd be so kind."

He touched the switch, and fluorescents hummed to life.

"Got enough junk in here, Senator?"

"There are times, sir, when I begin to believe that the lack of adequate storage space is one of the most maddening problems facing the American people today. Have you ever noticed, my friend, that the newer the house, the smaller and fewer the closets? Have you—"

"Shut up, Senator."

"Right."

"Give me the keys, and get behind the wheel."

Maiter passed over the keys, opened the door, and sat in his built-in-Japan-bolted-together-in-California Chevrolet. "Okay."

"Cuff yourself to the wheel." He gave the senator a pair of old-fashioned metal handcuffs.

Resignedly, Maiter clicked one over his left wrist, and the other to the wheel. "Now what?"

"You have a garage-door opener in there?"

"On the sun visor."

"All right. Let me come around to the other side and get in." He did just that, though getting into the passenger seat took a great deal of huffing and puffing. "All right, start 'er up."

Maiter complied.

"Now let's see if opening the door scrapes the paint on a cop car."

At a touch of a button, the door rumbled up. Bethesda police cruisers blocked the foot of the drive, and lined the curb on both sides of the street for as far as the eye (with its limited perspective) could see. The officers themselves had apparently taken cover, but sunlight glinted off dozens of police automatics and more than a few shotguns.

The kidnapper said, "Now, I'll bet that at least some of those cops have portable TVs, Senator. Even if they don't, they're probably in constant contact with someone who does. So I'll merely say this: If the driveway isn't clear in one minute flat, I will put a bullet through your left knee."

Maiter said, "I hope you officers heard that," and fell silent, wondering just how much experience Walter Reed Hospital had in repairing exploded kneecaps. Probably quite a bit. But still . . .

On the street, engines coughed, sputtered, and roared. The cruisers parked by the driveway pulled slowly away.

"Okay, Senator. Let's go for a drive. Get on 95, and take that to the Beltway. Ready?"

"Why not?" He threw the car into reverse and backed down to the street. "Hit the opener, would you?"

"Sure." The man reached up.

For a wild moment Christopher Howlen Maiter fantasized lashing out, chopping the gun from the man's hand with a savage karate blow, overcoming him in hand-to-hand battle, all on coast-to-coast network TV—but the man reached with his left hand, and the hand that held the gun did not even budge. The door shut with a rusty squeal. "Thanks."

"My pleasure."

The instant the car backed into the street, J. Edgar woke up snarling: **Violation: Operating a motor vehicle without a license. Violation: Operating a motor vehicle barefoot. Violation: Operating a motor vehicle with a loaded firearm in the passenger compartment. Violation: Operating a motor vehicle with an unregistered firearm in the passenger compartment.**

Maiter said, "Oh, sh— shucks."

"What?"

"J. Edgar Hoover is still running."

"So?"

"So I'm breaking four different laws, and it won't shut up until either I stop breaking them, or am taken into custody. After a couple minutes of J. Edgar, I can't even see straight. Say, that gun wouldn't happen to be registered, would it?"

"As a matter of fact, it is."

"You hear that, J. Edgar?"

Acknowledged. Violation: Operating a motor vehicle without a license. Violation: Operating a motor vehicle barefoot. Violation: Operating a motor vehicle with a loaded firearm in the passenger compartment.

"Come on, McGaughan!"

Vi-o- /click/

He said, "Whew!"

"What?" said the kidnapper.

"They just shut J. Edgar off."

Not quite, Senator. We can't do that—that would leave the entire government unmonitored. We've got a judge on line, though, and he swore out arrest warrants for you, which seems to have satisfied J. Edgar. We'll void them later, of course.

"Oh, that's great!"

The kidnapper poked him in the ribs. "What now?"

"They've got warrants for my arrest."

"Drive."

He drove. He wished he could stop for a quick leak, but he drove. Three police cars led the way onto the interstate, lights flashing, sirens mercifully silent. Twenty more followed them. "Listen, now that we're moving and all, could you tell me *why*?"

"Sure. We know you're against the 30th Amendment and in favor of the bill to repeal, so you're going to miss the vote."

"That's crazy!"

"Not really. We'd also like to take the opportunity to tell those senators in our viewing audience that if they should vote for the bill, they would subsequently find themselves in a position similar to but more desperate than yours."

"Are you some kind of grammarian?"

"Merely as precise in thought as I am in action, Senator."

"Do you really think you can get away with this?"

"Senator, as long as you miss the vote, I *have* 'gotten away with' it."

"But afterwards—you'll never escape." Through the open window came the clattering of a helicopter, apparently stalking them from above.

"Did I say I expected to? Freedom demands sacrifice, Senator, and if I must be the one to make the sacrifice, so be it."

"Freedom? America is the freest country in the world!"

"Perhaps, though we might argue that, but whatever truth your statement contains results directly from the 30th Amendment."

"What? That's bullsh— nonsense!" He really did wish that he were not on the air.

At that, the kidnapper launched into a monologue addressed to Maiter but, the senator suspected, really meant for the viewing audience. "Senator, the 30th Amendment says three things: First, that all elected federal officials are subject to every federal law, rule, or regulation to which any other American citizen or resident is subject, and that violation of any law, local state or federal, by any elected federal official is a felony. Second, that no federal official may depend on any assistance, whether human or mechanical, in order to comply with any federal law, rule, or regulation. And third, that all elected federal officials shall be subject to the closest possible audiovisual electronic surveillance in order to ascertain their compliance with points one and two."

"But that amendment is tyranny of the highest order!" Maiter set his turn indicator, and shifted lanes to pass a battered pickup truck doing forty.

J. Edgar Hoover squawked, **Violation: Exceeding posted speed limits!**

He slowed down.

"The amendment is tyranny, Senator? Tell me, when you took office ten years ago, to how many pages did the tax code run?"

"That is totally irrelevant."

"No question asked by a fanatic with a .38 caliber revolver is irrelevant, Senator."

"Right." At least he knew the answer: It was a thoroughly beaten dead horse. "Seventy-three thousand, but—"

"And now that the five hundred thirty-seven elected officials of the federal government have to fill out their own tax returns each year, without benefit of computer or even calculator, how many pages compose the tax code?"

"Twelve, but—"

"Are you telling me that that reform has not lifted a great burden from the American people?"

"It put tens if not hundreds of thousands of people out of work!"

"Accountants and lawyers, for the most part, yes?"

"As well as lumberjacks, paper mill workers, truck drivers"—he gestured out the windows at the office buildings along either side of the highway—"clerks, secretaries, postal employees, printers, binders—"

"You're saying, then, that the old seventy-three-thousand-page tax code was actually an employment measure?"

"Well, no, but—"

"But you are saying that the new one has reduced operating expenses for virtually all American businesses, yes?"

Bladder pressure made coherent thought difficult if not impossible. Certainly he was in no condition to debate a terrorist. "Um. . . ."

"Such tyranny! Tell me, since you're so opposed to the amendment, how the American people have suffered now that you federal officials are subject to truth-in-advertising laws?"

"Ah. . . ." Four U.S. Army jeeps rolled onto the highway dead ahead.

The kidnapper did not react. "Perhaps the public has suffered because Congress now has to observe the prohibitions against discriminatory hiring?"

"Well, now, there's a very good example of why the amendment should be repealed. The equal employment opportunity laws were much stricter before Congress was forced to abide by them—" Wincing at the unfortunate phrasing, he did his best to recover. Thank God the camera focused on the road, and not his face. "Because many of my, shall we say, less progressive colleagues maintained that first, the requisite record-keeping consumed far too much time and effort, and second, that a qualitative difference exists between hiring confidential staff and hiring assembly-line workers. I myself disagree, and publish statistical breakdowns of my staff—"

"Are those the breakdowns that include Lucia Gomez in five separate categories: black, female, Spanish-surnamed, handicapped, and elderly?"

"Lucia Gomez is one of my most valued—"

"Senator, let's go straight to the heart of the issue. It used to be that many Congressmen were figureheads who voted the way they were told by power brokers, or special interest groups, or political action committees, and the like. Today, anyone who wants to influence your vote has to speak on the record—into the microphone, at least, if not the camera. How has this harmed the American public?"

"Well . . . it does rather curtail free and frank discussion, as I'm sure you can see."

"You're saying that people are afraid to speak the truth?"

"Not that, exactly—"

"They're afraid to cut deals, then."

"Listen," he said, suddenly so weary that he was no longer afraid, "neither of us is going to convince the other of the rightness of his position." He looked across the front seat. The kidnapper had braced the elbow of his right arm on the windowsill. Maiter stared very hard at the bare, vulnerable elbow, running his gaze from it to the gun in the right hand and back again, hoping that some sharpshooter in their entourage would understand what he was getting at and take aim. "Why don't we just end the discussion, all right? And I'm nearly out of gas, here, so you'd better tell me what you want me to do."

"What I want is for you to tell me why repeal of the 30th Amendment would make you a better representative of the people of California."

"Because—"

Hold the car very steady, Senator.

Maiter's knuckles whitened on the wheel. He fought to keep his voice level. "Because—"

The windshield turned to powdered milk. The kidnapper shrieked as bullets tore through his right arm and leg. The .38 discharged into the dashboard just before he dropped it.

**Brake to a stop but don't change lanes, Senator.

The police cars will keep you from getting rear-ended.**

He did. Moments later, blue uniforms swarmed over his car, hauling away the maimed kidnapper and picking the lock on the cuffs that chained Maiter to the steering wheel. They helped him out of the driver's seat, asking, "Are you all right? Do you need a doctor, an ambulance, a—"

"Five minutes of privacy," he said, already walking stiff-legged toward the side of the road. Lowering his voice, he said, "McGaughan. Cut the networks out right now."

Ninety seconds, Senator.

He couldn't wait that long. So he stared at the tree-tops while he relieved the pressure, but J. Edgar Hoover heard too much and interpreted too well: **Violation: urination in a public place! Viola—**

"I'll pay the fine, J. Edgar," he whispered. "Believe me, I'll pay." ♦

The Eggs in the Streets



Arlan Andrews, Sr.

"They're the size of canteloupes now, Paul," Donger said, craning his neck to see through the dirty glass pane, "and they're all over the streets. They're growing pretty fast." Turning his head from the dingy office window, the pale flabby man took a long slow draw of steaming cocaiffine through a long straw tube imbedded in a grotesquely morphing mug, now all oaken and gnomed and sweat-bedewed, sure to turn into something more disgusting. The man has a problem, Paul Strawn thought. He heard Donger's obscene slurping and a sickening belch, even before the stench wafted over from the terminal at his left. Outside the window, the grunts and cries and frustrated screeches of heavy machinery. Strawn paid no attention as Donger rattled on. "Even the bulldozers can't move them. Damnedest thing I ever saw."

Irritated, Paul Strawn finally glanced over at his puffy terminal-mate, wondering how the dough-faced man got away with flaunting office rules, time after time, day after day. Himself, he'd get docked pay if his eyes so much as left the displate for a moment. Catching himself looking, Strawn swore silently. Damn Donger! He'd

Illustration by Paul McCall

glanced up, eyes off the work screen. An infraction. No doubt some Nihon *Aye-Eye* in the 'plate had tattled, docking him fractions of a second of pay. Yeah, he'd heard the rationale for *all eyes, all the time*—Nihon's work ethic—but it was more than a man could take.

As if he were a man anymore, hooked up to a freeeqing netnode displate terminal.

"You are the human element in the distributed intelligence network that has made possible our global economy," some faceless Nihon still lectured in Strawn's memory. He recognized the *wrongness* of that memory and mentally gagged. Just a freeeqing memplant. When did they do *that* one? No answer: no real memory of that memplant, not even a memplanted answer. Just the fruckin work. He stared at the displate intently, frowning. Causeless, meaningless patterns drooped and swirled and saddled and glopped, a frenzied palette from an insane artist. Worse than insane, Strawn thought, just GaAspin' nightmares.

"Newsplate said this mornin' they just dropped down from the sky like so many little golf balls, and kind of attached themselves to the streets. Just the streets. All the streets, dirt and gravel and paved. Rocks, concrete, asphalt. All over the world," Donger droned on.

Strawn forced his attention back on some kind of anomalous kaleidoscopic pattern on the displate, one that meant trouble. Memories or memplants, he couldn't tell which this time, instructed him that too many axes of symmetry were BAD; two were GOOD; polar was OPTIMUM. Faint traces of the original Japanese language worked around the stiff English; the translation algoes weren't always perfect. *Hiragana, there agana, every where agana gana*, a nonsense rhyme, repeating itself somewhere in his brain or his mind or in a fruckin memplant, in rhythm to the throbbing nonsense on the 'plate.

What the hell the patterns were for, what the hell the displate monitored or measured, or created or destroyed for that matter, Strawn hadn't been told. Hadn't even thought to ask. Until today. Why today, for God's sake? Can't think, he thought. Thinking's for the designers. Mantra time: *Goddad gho widada flow* echoed through unused labyrinths of his mind, flowing over into refugee corners of his mind, digitally amplified, digitally freeeqed, GaAsping for control.

What the hell was *fatabass* Donger saying anyhow? Shit-colored throbbing blobs the size of soccer balls in the freeeqin' streets? On his way through rubble-strewn streets to work before dawn that morning, Strawn'd seen the fruckin *she-ite* coming down all over the fruckin streets, falling from the freeeqing skies. Looked like damn cosmic scabies to him, dandruff from the fruckin no-zone layer. He'd tried to kick one of the balls, but it didn't kick easy, didn't in fact even *move* and who the *she-ite* wanted more bruised toes and another hole in the shoe over tennis-sized shitballs anyhow?

A few homies had built a trashfire over one, trying to burn it for free warmth or trying to fry themselves an egg from the sky, he couldn't tell. He'd avoided the damn, freeeqin' things and threaded his way around them, on the way to work. An old previously abandoned Federal

building, someone once called it. Whoever the hell the Federals had been and why they deserted the ominous gray structure, no one ever said. Nihon liked it, bought it, fitted it out, used it, and he worked there and that's all that mattered.

God damn freeeqing eggballs in the streets!

Another memplant kicked in and told Strawn it was time to stop, stand, stretch, and shit. In close approximation to that sequence, he followed orders. Donger was still hooked up to his side of the terminal, looking out the window, still sucking down the caffeine from that long tube. The mug morphed into a female body part. The guy looked like a giant slug, sucking human fluids; Strawn winced.

Dagra was home, he remembered, evanescent memplantings gratefully fading to the background during the break period. Dagra, working at the home station, outputting assemblies at an ever-increasing rate, always matching her quota, a perfect Nihon automaton, her wretched arms moving independent of her beautiful, beatific face. Like a freeeqing spider! Hands sweating, Strawn walked five meters to the relief station, detoxed, washed up, came back to sit in the ergochair. At his sides, he laid his arms into the terminal interfaces. Parchment-thin and blue-veined, his appendages lay like long white worms in the armtrenches. Dead worms. Cuffs and belts and godknows whatelse crawled out in reptilian embraces and locked his forearms, connecting him into the worldnet. Something else slithered up his neck and a peaceful warmth flowed from the base of his spine. He began the zenner chant that activated the memplants and yielded up his nervous system to whatever it was he did. He'd have to massage Dagra's poor skinny arms tonight, like he did every night. Too bad she didn't have his mental aptitude for the displate. No, she tested out bad, good only for *pick and place*, home work, intelligent machinery.

She-ite, at least *be* didn't have freeeqing skinsockets in his fruckin shoulders. At least *this* job didn't require him to be a fruckin drobot, arms whipping back and forth like a goddam spider's while his mind—well, whatever Dagra's mind did during that time, she wouldn't or couldn't talk about.

She'd talked a lot once, after Paulito's arrival. "Paul, I've got to go to work to pay for the emigration. It's Paulito's only chance. He's gotta have a better life."

Better life? he'd yelled at her. Move to freeeqin' Chile, for god's sake? That place is so down and out, not even the Nihon—

"Yes, Paul? So bad that even the Nihon don't want it?" She'd locked her arms around him, body heat to body heat. Not much of that since the freeeqing pick-and-place! "Would it be so bad to be away from the net? Away from the *Aye-Eyes*? Away from your *uork*?"

Damn her anyhow, she'd been right and Paul went with her for the skinplanting of the shouldersockets. Nine million operations per elbow joint, the actuary said, and then we replace them for you. Almost free. Smiling. Carpal tunnels get routed out for nothing; you don't need

all that flexibility in the wrists anyway. Serious: Shoulder joints are a little more complicated; you have to pay for changing those out.

Smiling.

A memplant kicked in, whispering softly, "Bonuses are paid for concentrating on the work. Physiological disturbances result from unpleasant recollections. *All eyes, all the time!*" One of the displate patterns popped into a pulsating nonlinearity mode, the singularity a blackness chasing itself around the multicolored workscreen. Another, larger singularity popped up beside it. Memplants or no, Strawn found himself enjoying the sing-tag game that resulted, and he knew that the pleasant recurring pattern paid off in more money in the debit account. He tried to think of why, but the mantra overrode conscious thought.

Godda gbo / Widow flow.

The two darting, carefree sings, small and large, reminded him of him and his kid playing *verch* tag, long cycles ago. Whenever. A tear formed on his cheek, forgotten before it crawled a millimeter.

Godda gbo / Widow flow.

"*Verched?*" He remembered the screams, Dagra's heaving sobs. How could they *nullverch* her only son, him only ten, it wasn't fair. But the Nihcoops had merely unplugged the twitching boy, lased an ID scan over the metallic eyecups, and carried him away. Virtual death was as real as analog death, Strawn had heard, but it'd been hard to take, what with the kid's body still intact. He never could figure out how *verching* could be dangerous, and it really wasn't, not just by itself. Hell, he himself liked the *verch*-world. *Tokyo Roach in Shinbun Alley* was his favorite. The kids, though, they netganged and went too far sometimes. They'd learned to mass memories, organizing like the old streetgangs that Strawn's dad used to talk about. Or was that the military? In little Paul's case, they told him later, the little guy'd dopplered himself into some fruckin forbidden Nihon net and all his amateur *verch* skills and frills didn't help a freeing bit. Feedforwards and feedbacks and *Aye-Eyes* had trailed Paulito down the backalleys and fibers and jumpnodes and T-bars and packets, uplinks and downlinks, commercial and Empire, until they found him all alone and unprotected, just sitting there gibsoned into the net with his father's old Cyberia-model jackin.

"*Aye-Eyes* don't know from asimov slaw," people always said, whatever that meant. In Paulito's case it meant that his brain got noded out right in his little head, erased his mind. Don't you worry, somebody netted later, you come up with the debits, Nihons'll reverch his mind. GaAs does great wonders. Cannafford it? Don't worry; some Nihon'll lease the body, have a second *verch* life, maybe a third or a tenth. *Verchers* live forever, they say.

But they never say it in English.

"Paul, you oughta look outta the window now," Donger's unwelcome *basso* croaked. "Big as freeqin' cars!"

You basso, Strawn thought, mentally turning to the memory of little Paul; but not being a memplant, that recall effort faded. *Godda goe*. Dissipated into a maelstrom of holostored digital control signal matrices. *Widow flow*.

"Oh, God, they're growin' faster!" Sounds of Donger struggling against his silicon bonds, sounds of gurgling and a mug smashing against the floor. *Whuffling* noises. *Pop*, soft *pop*!

Dagra's image surfaced from the *floe*, unbidden and unwelcome, and up rose a memplant defense: "Overstressing one's emotions leads to unbalanced loads. A healthy mind needs a healthy mantra. Repeat after me—" Dagra's image stood, screaming for little Paul. For mere nanoseconds, the sing-tag game faded into wife and son. Spider-arms windmilling, meaningless assemblies intricate and delicate bouncing off the homeshop walls, Dagra vanished down the same neural pathways, searching for Paulito.

GaAsping, *Godda. Go. Window. Flow.*

The light from the window was suddenly dim, and Strawn jerked back to analog instantly. Memplant: "Abrupt changes in environmental conditions require immediate attention. Property damage must be minimized." Be discrete, Strawn added mentally, go digital! Something hard slid into his arms; his spine stiffened, he was suddenly strong. A memplant muttered something about repelling intruders, but the displate's vision was more compelling. On the workscreen, two large sings were spiraling inward, inward, toward the smaller, stable sing at the center. Even without a memplant's unwelcome whispered conclusions, Strawn knew they would intersect shortly.

Donger was squealing, mewing, panic-stricken, burbling for his mother. Sounds of flesh ripping from cables, connector-patches from skin, then Donger's arms grasped him around the chest from behind. Rheumy wheezes, filthy breath, the stench of univied life. Funny, Strawn thought as his platemate's blood pumped from silicon-patch stigmata, warm and thick over his chest, Nihon told us the connection was voluntary, we could discon-net at will. He wondered if he could just lift his arms. Sure he could; "Emergency override always rests with the human," they said. In English; it must be so.

Outside in the street, noises like elephants ripping apart, inhuman and unhuman screams. The room grew dark. Donger's arms withdrew, desperate hands scrabbling at Strawn's shoulders, then sounds of a fat body slopping against the floor. Donger mewing somewhere behind him. Bulging windowglass creaked like fingernails on a slate wall. But Strawn's eyes glazed only at the displate. A memplant screamed, "Equipment must be protected! Damage must be minimized!"

Sounds of the window shattering, tinkles of shards impacting, the stings and arrows of slivers impinging, darkness pouring over Strawn's shoulder. From the floor, Donger's voice a fading whimper. "Paul, I really think you oughta take a look at this." ♦

The Red World and the Blue

From the author's forthcoming novel, "Mars,"
a June release from Bantam Spectra

Ben Bova

Listen to the wisdom of the
Old Ones:

The red world and the blue
are brothers. They were born
together in the seething mael-
strom of dust and gas spinning
out from the heart of the vast
cloud that was to become Fa-
ther Sun.

For uncountable time each
world was a scene of endless
violence. Monsters roared down
out of the sky, pounding the
worlds mercilessly in a holo-
caust of terrible explosions.
Under such awesome bom-
bardment there could be no
solid ground; the rocks them-
selves were liquid, bubbling
magma as the fiery rain from



Illustration by Bob Eggleton

the sky went on and on, blotting out the radiance of the newly bright Father Sun with steaming clouds that covered each world from pole to pole.

Slowly, with the godlike patience of the stars themselves, slowly their surfaces cooled. Solid land took form, bare rock, hard and harsh and lifeless. Worse than the desert where The People live; much worse. There was no tree, no blade of grass, not even a drop of water.

Deep below their crusts both worlds were still liquid-hot with the energy of their violent creation. Water trapped beneath the ground was boiled up, sweated out of the depths like droplets beading a gourd in the heat of summer. The water evaporated up into the thin film of atmosphere swaddling each newborn world. Cooling rain began to spatter onto the naked rocks, running into rivulets, streams, raging torrents that gouged the rocks out of their paths and tore huge gashes in the land.

On the bigger of the two worlds mighty oceans grew, filling deep rocky basins with water. The smaller world formed broad shallow lakes, but gradually they faded away into the thin, cold atmosphere or sank out of sight below the surface of the land.

Because of its glistening wide oceans the larger of the two worlds took on a deep blue tint. The smaller world slowly turned into a dusty, windblown desert as its waters sank into its ground. It turned rust-red.

Life arose on the blue world, first in the seas and later on dry land. Gigantic beasts roamed forests and marshes, only to disappear forever. At last The People came to the blue world. First Man and First Woman emerged, standing tall and proud in the bright sunlight. Their children multiplied. Some of them became inquisitive about the world in which they lived and the stars that dotted the night.

They turned their intelligent eyes to the red gleam in the sky that marked their brother world and wondered what it was. They watched it carefully, and the other stars too, and tried to understand the workings of the heavens.

To The People, the stars spoke of the endless cycles of the seasons, the time to plant, the time of the rains. The red world held no special fascination for them. They called it merely Big Star.

To the Anglos, steeped in conquest and killing, whenever their pale eyes turned to the red gleam in the sky that marked their brother world they trembled with thoughts of blood and death. They named the red world after their god of war.

Mars.

SOL 1: MORNING

"Touchdown."

It was said in Russian first and then immediately repeated in English.

Jamie Waterman never felt the actual moment when they touched the surface of Mars. The descent vehicle was lowering so gently that when it finally set down on the ground Jamie and the others realized it only because

the vibration of the rocket thrusters ceased. Beyond everything else, Vosnesensky was a superb pilot.

All sense of motion stopped. There was no sound at all. Through the thick insulation of his pressure suit's helmet Jamie could hear nothing except his own excited breathing.

Then Joanna Brumado's voice came through his earphones, hushed, awed. "We're here."

Eleven months ago they had been on Earth. Half an hour ago they had been in orbit around the planet Mars. Then came the terrifying ride down, shaking and bumping and burning their way through the thin atmosphere, an artificial meteor blazing across the empty Martian sky. A journey of more than a hundred million kilometers, a quest that had already taken four years of their lives, had at last reached its destination.

Now they sat in numb silence on the surface of a new world, four scientists encased in bulky bright-colored pressure suits that made them look as if they had been swallowed alive by oversized human-shaped robots.

Abruptly, without a word of command from the cockpit above them, the four scientists began to unstrap their safety harnesses and get up stiffly, awkwardly from their chairs. Jamie slid his helmet visor up as he squeezed between Ilona Malater and Tony Reed to get to the small round observation port, the only window in their cramped compartment.

He reached the window and looked out. The other three pressed around him, their hard-shell pressure suits butting and sliding against one another like a quartet of awkward tortoises trying to dip their beaks into the same tiny life-giving puddle.

A red dusty desert stretched out as far as the eye could see, rust-colored boulders scattered across the barren, gently rolling land like toys left behind by a careless child. The uneven horizon seemed closer than it should be. The sky was a delicate salmon pink. Small wind-shaped dunes heaped in precise rows, and the reddish sand piled against some of the bigger rocks.

Jamie catalogued the scene professionally: Ejecta from impacts, maybe volcanic eruptions but more likely meteor hits. No bedrock visible. The dunes look stable, probably been there since the last dust storm, maybe longer.

"Mars," breathed Joanna Brumado, her helmet practically touching his as they peered through the window.

"Mars," Jamie agreed.

"It looks so desolate," said Ilona Malater, sounding disappointed, as if she expected a welcoming committee or at least a blade of grass.

"Exactly like the photos," said Antony Reed.

To Jamie, the red desert world beyond the window looked just as he had expected it to look. Like home.

The first member of the team to leave the landing ship was the sturdy bulbous construction robot. Crowding against the small observation window with the three other scientists, Jamie Waterman watched the blue-gray metal vehicle roll across the rusty red sand on its six springy wheels, then stop abruptly fifty meters from where their lander stood.

Watching the square-sided machine with the bulky

liquefied air tanks atop it, Jamie thought to himself, Russian design, Japanese electronics and American software. Just like everything else on this expedition.

A pair of gleaming metal arms unfolded from the truck's front like a giraffe climbing to its feet and began to pull a shapeless heap of plastic from the big storage bin on its side. The robot spread its edges on the red sandy ground as precisely as a grandmother spreading a tablecloth. Then it seemed to stop, as if minutely inspecting the shiny, rubbery-looking plastic material. Slowly, though, the lifeless plastic began to stir. Jamie knew that it was filling with air from the big tanks on the robot's top. The plastic heap grew and took form: a bubble, a balloon, finally a rigid hemispherical dome that completely hid the robot from view.

Ilona Malater, pressing close, murmured, "Our home on Mars."

Tony Reed replied, "If it doesn't leak."

For more than an hour they watched the industrious little robot building their inflated dome, fixing its rim firmly to the dusty Martian soil, trundling back and forth through a man-tall flap to get reinforcing metal ribs from the landing vehicle's cargo bay and even a complete airlock assembly and then weld them into place.

They were all anxious to go outside and plant their booted feet on the rust-red soil of Mars, but Vosnesensky insisted that they follow the mission plan to the letter. "The braking structure must cool," the Russian called down to them from the cockpit, by way of legitimizing his decision. "The dome structure must be finished and fully pressurized."

Vosnesensky, of course, was too busy to stand by the observation port and watch with the rest of them. As commander of the ground team he was up in the cockpit, checking out all the lander's systems while he reported to the mission leader in the spacecraft orbiting overhead and, through him, to the mission controllers back on Earth, more than a hundred million kilometers away.

Pete Connors, the American astronaut who copiloted the lander, sat at Vosnesensky's side and monitored both the construction robot and the sensors that were sampling the thin air outside. Only the four scientists were free to watch the machine erect the first human habitation on the surface of the planet Mars.

"We should be getting into our backpacks," said Joanna Brumado.

"Plenty of time for that," Tony Reed said.

Ilona Malater gave a wicked little laugh. "You wouldn't want *him* to become angry with us, would you, Tony?" She pointed upward, toward the cockpit level.

Reed cocked an eyebrow and smiled back at her. "I don't suppose it would do to upset him on the very first day, would it?"

Jamie took his eyes from the hard-working robot, now fitting a second heavy metal airlock into the designated place on the dome's curving structure. Without a word he squeezed past the three others and reached for the backpack to his pressure suit, hanging on its rack against the far bulkhead. Like their suits, the backpacks

were color coded: Jamie's was sky-blue. He backed against it and felt the latches click into place against the back of his hard suit. The suit itself still felt stiff, like a new pair of Levis, only worse. It took real effort to move the shoulder joints of the pressure suit.

In the jargon of the Mars Project their vehicle was called an L/AV: landing/ascent vehicle. It had been designed for efficiency, not comfort. It was large, but most of its space was given to capacious cargo bays in which the equipment and supplies for these six explorers were housed. Atop the cargo bays was the airlock level where the hard suits and backpacks for outside work were stored. There were four fold-down seats in the airlock level, but the compartment felt terribly crowded to Jamie when he and the three other scientists were jammed into it, especially when they were bundled inside their cumbersome hard-shell suits. Above the airlock level was the cockpit with the cosmonaut commander and astronaut second-in-command.

If they had to, the six men and women could live for days inside this landing vehicle. The mission plan called for them to set up their base in the inflated dome that the robot was building. But they could survive in the lander, if it came to that.

Maybe, Jamie thought that if they had to spend even as little as a few hours cooped up in this cramped claustrophobic compartment, somebody would commit murder. It had been bad enough during the nine-month flight from Earth in the much roomier modules of the parent spacecraft. This little descent vehicle would quickly turn into a lunatic asylum if they had to live in it for days on end.

They donned the backpacks using the buddy system, as they had been trained to do, one scientist helping the other to check out all the connections to the suit batteries, heater and air regenerator. Then check it all again. The backpacks were designed to connect automatically to ports in the pressure suit, but one tiny misalignment could kill you out on the surface of Mars.

Then they began to check the suits themselves, from the heavy boots to the marvelously thin and flexible gloves. What passed for air outside was rarer than the highest stratosphere of Earth, an unbreathable mix of mainly carbon dioxide. An unprotected human would die in an explosive agony of ruptured lungs and blood that would literally boil at such low pressure.

"What! Not ready yet!"

Vosnesensky's deep voice grated. The Russian tried to make it sound mildly humorous, but it was clear that he had no patience with his scientific underlings. He was fully encased in his blazing red suit, backpack riding like a hump behind his shoulders, ready to go, as he clumped down the ladder from the cockpit. Connors, right behind him, was also in his clean white hard suit and backpack. Jamie wondered which genius among the administrators and psychologists back home had assigned the black astronaut to a gleaming white suit.

Jamie had helped Tony Reed and now the Englishman turned away from him to face their flight commander. "We'll be ready in a few moments, Mikhail Andreivitch.

Please be patient with us. We're all a bit nervous, you know."

It was not until that exact moment that the enormity of it hit Jamie. They were about to step outside this metal canister and plant their booted feet on the red soil of Mars. They were about to fulfill a dream that had haunted humankind for all the ages of existence.

And I'm a part of it, Jamie said to himself. Maybe by accident, but still I'm here. On Mars!

"You want my honest opinion? It's crazy."

Jamie and his grandfather Al were hiking along the crest of the wooded ridge that overlooked the freshly whitewashed mission church and the clustered adobe houses of the pueblo. The first snow had dusted the mountains and the Anglo tourists would soon be arriving for the ski season. Al wore his bulky old sheepskin coat and droop-brimmed hat with the silver coin band. Jamie felt so warm in the morning sun that he had already unzipped his dark blue NASA-issue windbreaker.

Al Waterman looked like an ancient totem pole, tall and bone-lean, his craggy face the faded tan color of weathered wood. Jamie was shorter, more solidly built, his face broader, his skin tanned an almost coppery brown. The two men shared only one feature in common: eyes as black and deep as liquid jet.

"Why is it crazy?" Jamie asked.

Al puffed out a breath of steam and turned to squint at his grandson, standing with his back to the sun.

"The Russians are runnin' the show, right?"

"It's an international mission, Al. The U.S., the Russians, Japanese, lots of other countries."

"Yeah, but the Russians are callin' most of the shots. They been shootin' at Mars for twenty years now. More."

"But they need our help."

"And the Japs."

Jamie nodded. "But I don't see what that's got to do with it."

"Well, it's like this, son. Here in the good old U.S. of A. you can get on the first team because you're an Indian—now don't get mad at me, sonny. I know you're a smart geologist and all that. But being a red man hasn't hurt you with NASA and those other government whites, has it? Equal opportunity and all that."

Jamie found himself grinning at his grandfather. Al ran a trinket shop on the plaza in Santa Fe and milked the tourists shamelessly. He harbored no ill will for the Anglos, no hostility or even bitterness. He simply used his wits and his charm to get along in the world, the same as any Yankee trader or Florida real estate agent. "Okay," Jamie admitted, "being a Native American hasn't hurt. But I *am* the best damned geologist they've got." That wasn't entirely true, he knew. But close enough. Especially for family.

"Sure you are," his grandfather agreed, straight-faced. "But those Russians aren't going to take you all the way to Mars on their ship just because you're a red man. They'll pick one of their own people, and you'll have spent two-three years training for nothing."

Jamie unconsciously rubbed at his nose. "Well, maybe.

That's a possibility. There are plenty of good geologists from other countries applying for the mission."

"So why break your heart? Why give them years of your life when the chances are a hundred to one against you?"

Jamie looked out past the darkly green ponderosa pines toward the rugged, weather-seamed cliffs where his ancestors had built their dwellings a thousand years ago. Turning back to his grandfather, he realized that Al's face was weathered and lined just as those cliffs were. His skin was almost the same bleached tan color.

"Because it draws me," he said. His voice was low but as firm as the mountains themselves. "Mars is drawing me to it."

Al gave him a puzzled, almost troubled look.

"I mean," Jamie tried to explain, "who am I, Al? What am I? A scientist, a white man, a Navaho—I don't really know who I am yet. I'm nearly thirty years old and I'm a nobody. Just another assistant professor digging up rocks. There's a million guys just like me."

"Helluva long way to go, all the way to Mars."

Jamie nodded. "I have to go there, though. I have to find out if I can make something of my life. Something real. Something important."

A slow smile crept across his grandfather's leathery face, a smile that wrinkled the corners of his eyes and creased his cheeks.

"Well, every man's got to find his own path in life. You've got to live in balance with the world around you. Maybe your path goes all the way out to Mars."

"I think it does, grandfather."

Al clasped his grandson's shoulder. "Then go in beauty, son."

Jamie smiled back at him. He knew his grandfather would understand. Now he had to break the news to his parents, back in Berkeley.

Vosnesensky personally checked each scientist's hard suit and backpack. Only when he was satisfied did he slide the transparent visor of his own helmet down and lock it in place.

"At last the time has come," he said in almost accentless English, like a computer's voice synthesis.

All the others locked their visors down. Connors, standing by the heavy metal hatch, leaned a gloved finger against the stud that activated the air pumps. Through the thick soles of his boots Jamie felt them start chugging, saw the light on the airlock control panel turn from green to amber.

Time seemed to stand still. For eternity the pumps labored while the six explorers stood motionless and silent inside their brightly colored hard suits. With their visors down Jamie could not see their faces, but he knew each of his fellow explorers by the color of their suits: Joanna was dayglo orange; Ilona vivid green; Tony Reed canary yellow.

The clattering of the pumps dwindled as the air was sucked out of the compartment until Jamie could hear nothing, not even his own breathing, because he was holding his breath in anticipation.

The pumps stopped. The indicator light on the panel next to the hatch went to red. Connors pulled the lever and the hatch popped open a crack. Vosnesensky pushed it all the way open.

Jamie felt light-headed. As if he had climbed to the top of a mesa too fast, or jogged a couple of miles in the thin air of the mountains. He let out his breath and took a deep gulp of his suit's air. It tasted cold and metal dry. Mars lay framed in the oval hatchway, glowing pink and red and auburn like the arid highlands where he had spent his childhood summers.

Vosnesensky was starting down the ladder, Jamie realized. Connors went down next, followed by Joanna, then Tony, Ilona, and finally himself. As if in a dream Jamie went slowly down the ladder, one booted foot at a time, gloved hands sliding along the gleaming metal rails that ran between two of the unfolded petals of the aerobrake. Its ceramic-coated alloy had absorbed the blazing heat of their fiery entry into the Martian atmosphere. The metal mesh seemed dead cold now.

Jamie stepped off the last rung of the flimsy ladder. He stood on the sandy surface of Mars.

He felt totally alone. The five human figures beside him could not truly be people; they looked like strange alien totems. Then he realized that they *were* aliens, and he was too. Here on Mars we are the alien invaders, Jamie told himself.

He wondered if there were Martians hidden among the rocks, invisible to their eyes, watching them the way red men had watched the first whites step ashore onto their land centuries ago. He wondered what they would do about this alien invasion, and what the invaders would do if they found native life forms.

In his helmet earphones Jamie could hear the Russian team leader conversing with the expedition commander up in the orbiting spacecraft, his deep voice more excited than Jamie had ever heard before. Connors was checking the TV camera perched up at the front of the stilled robot construction vehicle.

Finally Vosnesensky spoke to his five charges as they arranged themselves in a semicircle around him, "All is ready. The words we speak next will be heard by everyone on Earth."

As planned, they stood with their backs to the landing vehicle while the robot's camera focused on them. Later they would pan the vidcam around to show the newly erected dome and the desolate Martian plain on which they had set foot.

Holding up one gloved hand almost like a symphony conductor, Vosnesensky took a self-conscious half step forward and pronounced: "In the name of Konstantin Eduardovich Tsiolkovsky, of Sergei Pavlovich Korolev, of Yuri Alexeyevich Gagarin and of all the other pioneers and heroes of space, we come to Mars in peace for the advancement of all human peoples."

He said it in Russian first and then in English. Only afterward were the others invited to recite their little prewritten speeches.

Pete Connors, with the hint of Texan drawl he had picked up during his years at Houston, recited, "This is

the greatest day in the history of human exploration, a proud day for all the people of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the whole world."

Joanna Brumado spoke in Brazilian Portuguese and then in English. "May all the peoples of the Earth gain in wisdom from what we learn here on Mars."

Ilona Malater, in Hebrew and then English, "We come to Mars to expand and exalt the human spirit."

Antony Reed, in his calm, almost bored Oxfordian best, "To His Majesty the King, to the people of the United Kingdom and the British Commonwealth, to the people of the European Community and the entire world—today is your triumph. We deeply feel that we are merely your representatives on this distant world."

Finally it was Jamie's turn. He felt suddenly weary, tired of the posturings and pomposities, exhausted by the years of stress and sacrifice. The excitement he had felt only minutes ago had drained away, evaporated. A hundred million kilometers from Earth and they were still playing their games of nations and allegiances. He felt as if someone had draped an enormous weight around his shoulders.

The others all turned toward him, five faceless figures in hard suits and gold-tinted visors. Jamie saw his own faceless helmet reflected five times. He had already forgotten the lines that had been written for him a hundred million kilometers ago.

He said simply, "Ya'aa'tey."

EARTH

Rio de Janeiro: It was bigger even than *Carnival*. Despite the scorching midafternoon sun the crowds thronged downtown, from the Municipal Theater all the way up the mosaic sidewalks of the Avenida Rio Branco, past Praca Pio X and the magnificent old Candelaria Church, and out along Avenida Presidente Vargas. Not a car or even a bicycle could get through. The streets were literally wall-to-wall with *carriocas*, dancing the samba, sweating, laughing, staggering in the heat, celebrating in the biggest spontaneous outpouring of joy that the city had ever seen.

They jammed into the tree-shaded residential square where gigantic television screens had been set up in front of high-rise glass-walled apartment buildings. They stood on the benches in the square and clambered up the trees for a better view of the screens. They cheered and cried and shouted as they watched the space-suited explorers, one by one, climb down the ladder and stand on that barren rocky desert beneath the strange pink sky.

When Joanna Brumado spoke her brief words they cheered all the louder, drowning out the little speeches of those who followed her.

Then they took up the chant: "Brumado—Brumado—Bru-ma-do! Bru-ma-do! Bru-ma-do!"

Inside the apartment that had been loaned to him for the occasion, Alberto Brumado smiled ruefully at his friends and associates. He had watched his daughter step onto the surface of Mars with a mixture of fatherly

pride and anxiety that had brought tears to the corners of his eyes.

"You must go out, Alberto," said the mayor of Rio. "They will not stop until you do."

Large TV consoles had been wheeled into the four corners of the spacious, high-ceilinged parlor. Only a dozen people had been invited to share this moment of triumph with their famous countryman, but more than forty others had squeezed into the room. Many of the men were already in evening clothes; the women wore their finest frocks and jewels. Later Brumado and the select dozen would be whisked by helicopter to the airport and then on to Brasília, to be received by the president of the republic.

Outside, the people of Rio thundered, "Bru-ma-do! Bru-ma-do!"

Alberto Brumado was a small, slight man. Well into his sixties, his dark round face was framed by a neatly clipped grizzled beard and short gray hair that seemed always tousled, as if he had just been engaged in some strenuous action. It was a kindly face, smiling, looking slightly nonplussed at the sudden insistence of the crowd outside. He was more accustomed to the quiet calm of the university classroom or the hushed intensity of the offices of the great and powerful.

If the governments of the world's industrial nations were the brain directing the Mars Project, and the multinational corporations were the muscle, then Alberto Brumado was the heart of the mission to explore Mars. No, more still: Brumado was its soul.

For more than thirty years he had traveled the world, pleading with those in power to send human explorers to Mars. For most of those years he had faced cold indifference or outright hostility. He had been told that an expedition to Mars would cost too much, that there was nothing humans could do on Mars that could not be done by automated robotic machinery, that Mars could wait for another decade or another generation or another century. There were problems to be solved on Earth, they said. People were starving. Disease and ignorance and poverty held more than half the world in their mercilessly tenacious grip.

Alberto Brumado persevered. A child of poverty and hunger himself, born in a cardboard shack on a muddy, rainswept hill overlooking the posh *residências* of Rio de Janeiro, Alberto Brumado had fought his way through public school, through college, and into a brilliant career as an astronomer and teacher. He was no stranger to struggle.

Mars became his obsession. "My one vice," he would modestly say of himself.

When the first unmanned landers set down on Mars and found no evidence for life, Brumado insisted that their automated equipment was too simple to make meaningful tests. When a series of probes from the Soviet Union and, later, the United States returned rocks and soil samples that bore nothing more complex than simple organic chemicals, Brumado countered that they had barely scratched a billionth of that planet's surface.

He hounded the world's scientific congresses and in-

dustrial conferences, pointing out the pictures of Mars that showed huge volcanoes, enormous rift valleys and canyons that looked as if they had been gouged out by massive flood waters.

"There must be water on Mars," he said again and again. "Where there is water there must be life."

It took him nearly twenty years to realize that he was speaking to the wrong people. It mattered not what scientists thought or what they wanted. It was the politicians who counted, the men and women who controlled national treasures. And the people, the voters who filled those treasuries with their tax money.

He began to haunt their halls of power—and the corporate offices and board rooms where the politicians bowed to the money that elected them. He made himself into a media celebrity, using talented, bright-eyed students to help create television shows that filled the world's people with the wonder and awe of the majestic universe waiting to be explored by men and women of faith and vision.

And he *listened*. Instead of telling the world's leaders and decision makers what they should do, he listened to what they wanted, what they hoped for, what they feared. He listened and planned and gradually, shrewdly, he shaped a scheme that would please them all.

He found that each pressure group, each organization of government or industry or ordinary citizens, had its own aims and ambitions and anxieties.

The scientists wanted to go to Mars for curiosity's sake. To them, exploration of the universe was a goal in itself.

The visionaries wanted to go to Mars because it is there. They viewed the human race's expansion into space with religious fervor.

The military said there was no point in going to Mars; the planet was so far away that it served no conceivable military function.

The industrialists realized that sending humans to Mars would serve as a stimulus to develop new technology—on risk-free money provided by government.

The representatives of the poor complained that the billions spent on going to Mars should be spent instead on food production and housing and education.

Brumado listened to them all and then softly, quietly, he began speaking to them in terms they could understand and appreciate. He played their dreams and dreads back to them in an exquisitely manipulative feedback that focused their attention on his goal. He orchestrated their desires until they themselves began to believe that Mars was the logical objective of their own plans and ambitions.

In time, the world's power brokers began to predict that Mars would be the new century's first test of a nation's vigor, determination, and strength. Media pundits began to warn gravely that it might be more costly to a nation's competitive position in the global marketplace *not* to go to Mars than to go there.

Statesmen began to realize that Mars could serve as the symbol of a new era of global cooperation in peaceful endeavors that could capture the hearts and minds of all the world.

The politicians in Moscow and Washington, Tokyo and Paris, Rio and Beijing, listened carefully to their advisors and then made up their minds. Their advisors had fallen under Brumado's spell.

"We go to Mars," said the American president to the Congress, "not for pride or prestige or power. We go to Mars in the spirit of the new pragmatic cooperation among the nations of the world. We go to Mars not as Americans or Russians or Japanese. We go to Mars as human beings, representatives of the planet Earth."

The president of the Soviet Federation told his people, "Mars is not only the symbol of our unquenchable will to expand and explore the universe, it is the symbol of the cooperation that is possible between East and West. Mars is the emblem of the inexorable progress of the human mind."

Mars would be the crowning achievement of a new era of international cooperation. After a century of war and terrorism and mass murder, a cosmic irony turned the blood-red planet named after the god of war into the new century's blessed symbol of peaceful cooperation.

For the people of the rich nations, Mars was a source of awe, a goal grander than anything on Earth, the challenge of a new frontier that could inspire the young and stimulate their passions in a healthy, productive way.

For the people of the poor nations—well, Alberto Brumado told them that he himself was a child of poverty, and if he thought of Mars filled him with exhilaration, why shouldn't they be able to raise their eyes beyond the squalor of their day-to-day existence and dream great dreams?

There was a price to be paid, of course. Brumado's successful wooing of the politicians meant that his cherished goal of Mars was the child of their marriage. Thus the first expedition to Mars was undertaken not as the scientists wanted it, not even as the engineers and planners of the various national space agencies wanted it. The first humans to go to Mars went as the politicians wanted them to go: as quickly and cheaply as possible.

The unspoken rationale of the first expedition was: politics first, science second—a distant second. This was to be a "flags and footprints" mission, no matter how much the scientists wanted to explore.

Efficiency was an even more distant third, as it usually is when political considerations are uppermost. The politicians found it easier to rationalize the necessary expenditures if the project were completed quickly, before an opposition party got the chance to gain power and take credit for the ultimate success. Haste did not automatically create waste, but it forced the administrators to plan a mission that was far from efficient.

Hundreds of scientists were recruited for the Mars Project. Scores of cosmonauts and astronauts. Thousands of engineers, technicians, flight controllers and administrators. They spent ten years in planning and three more in training for the two-year-long mission. All so that twenty-five men and women could spend sixty days at Mars. Seven paltry weeks on Mars, and then back home again. That was the mission plan. That was the goal for which thousands devoted thirteen years of their lives.

To the world at large, however, the excitement of the Mars Project grew with each passing month as the chosen personnel went through their training and the spacecraft took shape at launching centers in the Soviet Federation, the United States, South America and Japan. The world made itself ready to reach out to the red planet. Alberto Brumado was the acknowledged spiritual leader of the Mars mission, although he was not entrusted with anything more concrete than moral support. But moral support was desperately needed more than once during the years, as one government or another would want to opt out of the decade-long financial burden. But none did.

Too old to fly into space himself, Brumado instead watched his daughter board the spacecraft that would take her to Mars.

Now he had watched her step out onto the surface of that distant world, while the crowd outside chanted his name.

Wondering if he had done the right thing, Alberto Brumado went to the long, sunlit windows. The crowd cheered wildly at the sight of him.

Kaliningrad: Mission control for the Mars expedition had more redundancy than the spacecraft the explorers flew in. While redundancy in the spacecraft was required for safety, at mission control it was required by politics. Each position in mission control was shared by two people at identical side-by-side consoles. Usually one was a Russian and the other an American, although at a few of the desks sat Japanese, British, French, and even an Argentine—with a Russian by the side of each one of them.

The men and women of the mission control center were just starting to celebrate. Up to the moment of touchdown they had been rigidly intent on their display screens, but now at last they could lean back, slip off their headsets, laugh together, sip champagne and light up victory cigars. Even some of the women took cigars. Behind the rows of consoles, in the glassed-in media section, the reporters and photographers toasted one another and the mission controllers with vodka in paper cups.

Only the chief of the American team, a burly balding man in his shirtsleeves, sweat stains at his armpits, unlit cigar clamped between his teeth, looked unhappy. He leaned over the chair of the American woman who bore the archaic title of CapCom.

"What did he say?"

She glanced up from her display screens. "I don't know what it was."

"It sure as hell wasn't what he was *supposed* to say!"

"Would you like to replay the tape?" asked the Russian working beside the young woman. His voice was soft, but it cut through the buzz of conversation.

The woman deftly tapped a few buttons on her keyboard and the screen once again showed the figure of James Waterman standing in his sky-blue pressure suit on the sands of Mars.

"Ya'aa'tey," said Jamie Waterman's image.

"Garbled transmission?" the chief asked.

"No way," said the woman.

The Russian turned from the screen to give the chief a piercing look. "What does it mean?"

"Damned if I know," grumbled the chief. "But we're sure as hell going to find out!"

And up in the media section, one young TV reporter noticed the two men hunched over the CapCom's seat. He wondered why they looked so puzzled.

Berkeley: Professor Jerome Waterman and Professor Lucille Monroe Waterman had decided to cancel their classes for the day and remain at home to watch their son step out onto the surface of Mars. No friends. No students or faculty colleagues. A battalion of reporters hovered outside the house, but the Watermans would not face them until after they had seen the landing.

They sat in their comfortably rumpled, book-lined study watching the television pictures, window blinds closed tightly against the bright morning sun and the besieging media reporters encamped outside.

"It takes almost ten minutes for the signals to reach the Earth," mused Jerry Waterman.

His wife nodded absently, her eyes focused on the sky-blue figure among the six faceless creatures on the screen. She held her breath when it was Jamie's turn at last to speak.

"Ya'aa'tey," said her son.

Lucille gasped. "Oh, no!"

Jamie's father grunted with surprise.

Lucille turned accusingly to her husband. "He's starting that Indian business all over again!"

Santa Fe: Old Al knew how to pack the store with customers even on a day like this. He had simply put a TV set prominently up on a shelf next to the Kachina dolls. People thronged in from all over the plaza to see Al's grandson on Mars.

"Ya'aa'tey," said Jamie Waterman, from a hundred million kilometers away.

"Hee-ah!" exclaimed old Al Waterman. "The boy did it!"

DATA BANK

Mars.

Picture Death Valley at its worst. Barren desert. Nothing but rock and sand. Remove every trace of life, get rid of each and every cactus, every bit of scrub, all the lizards and insects and sun-bleached bones and anything else that even looks as if it might have once been alive.

Now freeze-dry the whole landscape. Plunge it down to a temperature of a hundred below zero. And suck away the air until there's not even as much as you would find on Earth a hundred thousand feet above the ground.

That is roughly what Mars is like.

Fourth planet out from the Sun, Mars never gets closer to the Earth than thirty-five million miles. It is a small world, roughly half the size of the Earth, with a surface gravity just a bit more than a third of Earth's. A hundred

pounds on Earth weighs only thirty-eight pounds on Mars.

Mars is known as the Red Planet because its surface is mainly a bone-dry desert of sandy iron oxides: rusty iron dust.

Yet there is water on Mars. The planet has bright polar caps composed at least partially of frozen water—covered over most of the year by frozen carbon dioxide, dry ice.

For Mars is a *cold* world. It orbits roughly one and a half times farther from the sun than the Earth does. Its atmosphere is far too thin to retain solar heat. On a clear midsummer day along the Martian equator the afternoon high temperature might climb to seventy degrees Fahrenheit; that same night, however, it will plunge to a hundred below zero or lower.

The atmosphere of Mars is too thin to breathe even if it were pure oxygen. Which it is not. More than ninety-five percent of the Martian "air" is carbon dioxide; nearly three percent nitrogen. There is a tiny amount of oxygen and even less water vapor. The rest of the atmosphere consists of inert gases such as argon, neon and such, a whiff of carbon monoxide, and a trace of ozone.

Still, Mars is the most Earthlike of any other world in the solar system. There are seasons on Mars—spring, summer, autumn and winter. Because its orbit is farther from the Sun, the Martian year is nearly twice as long as Earth's (a few minutes short of 689 Earth days) and its seasons are correspondingly much longer than Earth's.

Mars rotates about its axis in almost the same time that Earth does. A day on Earth is 23 hours, 56 minutes, and 4.09 seconds long. A day on Mars is only slightly longer: 24 hours, 37 minutes, and 22.7 seconds.

To prevent confusion between Earth time and Martian, space explorers refer to the Martian day as a "Sol." In one Martian year there are 669 sols, plus an untidy 14 hours, 46 minutes and 12 seconds.

Is there life on Mars?

That question has haunted the human psyche for centuries. It is the primary force behind our drive to reach the red planet. We want to see for ourselves if life can exist there.

Or once did.

Or does now.

SOL 1: AFTERNOON

The first thing the scientists did, after their little arrival speeches, was collect contingency samples of the Martian rocks, soil, and atmosphere.

Just in case a sudden emergency forced them to scramble into their landing/ascent vehicle and blast back into orbit around the planet, they spent their first two hours on the surface stuffing rocks and soil samples into airtight cases and filling vials with whiffs of air taken from ground level on up to ten meters, the latter obtained with the use of a gangling titanium pole.

Meanwhile, the construction robot trundled across the rocky ground out to the three unmanned cargo carriers

that had landed the previous day, scattered over a two-kilometer-wide radius from their nominal landing site. Like an oversized mechanical ant, the robot busily hauled their cargos back to the inflated dome that would be home to the explorers for the next seven weeks.

Mikhail Andreivitch Vosnesensky, veteran of a dozen space missions, sat up in the cockpit in the commander's seat, keeping one eye on the scientists and the other on the mission schedule. Beside him, Pete Connors monitored the robot and conversed with the expedition command in orbit around the planet. Although both men stayed in their hard suits, ready to dash outside if an emergency required their help, they had taken their helmets off.

Connors switched off the radio and turned to the Russian. "The guys in orbit confirm that we landed only a hundred thirty meters from our nominal target spot. They send their congratulations."

Vosnesensky offered a rare smile. "It would have been closer, but the boulders were too big further south."

"You did a damned good job," said Connors. "Kalinin-grad will be pleased." His voice was a rich baritone, trained in church choirs. The American had a long, almost horsey face with a complexion the color of milk chocolate and large sorrowful brown eyes rimmed with red. His hair was cropped militarily short, showing the distinct vee of a widow's peak.

"You know what the old pilots say," Vosnesensky replied.

Connors chuckled. "Any landing you can walk away from is a good landing."

"All systems are working. We are on schedule." It was Vosnesensky's way of making light of his skillful landing. The Russian did not trust flattery, even from a man he had worked with for nearly four years. A scowl was the normal expression on his broad, beefy face. His sky-blue eyes always looked suspicious.

"Yeah. And now the second team has to land where we are. Wonder how good Mironov and my old buddy Abell will be?"

"Mironov is very good. An excellent pilot. He could land on our roof, if he wanted to."

Connors laughed, light and easy. "Now that would cause a helluva problem, wouldn't it?"

Vosnesensky made his lips curl upward, but it obviously took an effort.

The scientists stored their contingency samples inside the airlock section of the L/AV. In an emergency, the airlock section and the cockpit atop it would lift off the ground. The lower half of the lander—the cargo bays and aerobrake—would remain on Mars. Even if one or more of the explorers were left behind, the precious samples would make it to the expedition spacecraft riding in orbit and then back to the scientists waiting on Earth.

That first chore completed to Vosnesensky's satisfaction, he ordered the team to move supplies into the dome. They hurried to beat the oddly tiny sun as it got close to the western horizon. The construction vehicle towed the heavy pallets of equipment for them, while

the explorers performed feats of seemingly superhuman strength, lifting man-tall green cylinders of oxygen tanks and bulky crates that would have weighed hundreds of pounds on Earth.

Sweating like a laborer inside his pressurized hard suit, Jamie smiled bitterly at the thought that the first task of the first explorers on Mars was to toil like coolies, grunting and lifting for hours in mindless drudgery. The public-relations statements and TV pictures make it all look so damned easy, he thought. Nobody ever watches a scientist at work—especially when he's doing dog labor.

Neither he nor the others paid any special attention to their low-gravity strength. Over the nine-plus months of their flight from Earth their spacecraft had spun on a five-kilometer-long tether to simulate a feeling of weight, since prolonged periods in zero gravity weakened muscles dangerously and demineralized bones. Their artificial gravity began at a normal Earthly one g, then was slowly reduced during the months of their flight to the Martian value of roughly one-third g. Now, on the surface of Mars, they could walk normally yet still lift enormous weights with their Earth-evolved muscles.

At the end of their long, exhausting day they moved at last inside the inflated dome. The tiny sun was turning the sky flame-red and the temperature outside was already fifty below zero.

The dome was filled with breathable air at normal Earth pressure and temperature, according to the gauges. The thermometer read precisely twenty-one degrees Celsius: sixty-nine point eight degrees Fahrenheit.

The six of them were still inside their pressurized hard suits, however, and would stay in them until Vosnesensky decided it was safe to breathe the dome's air. Jamie's suit felt heavy against his shoulders. It no longer had that "new car" odor of clean plastic and untouched fabric; it smelled of sweat and machine oil. The backpack regenerator replaced carbon dioxide with breathable oxygen, but the filters and miniature fans inside the suit could not remove all of the odors that accumulated from strenuous work.

"Now comes the moment of truth," he heard Ilona Malater's husky voice, sounding sexy—or maybe just tired.

Vosnesensky had spent the past few hours checking the dome for leaks, monitoring the air pressure and composition, fussing over the life-support pumps and heaters grouped together in the center of the hardened plastic flooring. One by one, the others slowly drifted to him, clumping in their thick boots, waiting for him to give the order they all awaited with a strange mixture of eagerness and dread.

Like it or not, Vosnesensky was their team leader, and their years of training had drilled them to obey their leader's orders without a thought for his nationality. Everything they did on this dangerously different world would be carried out according to rules and regulations painstakingly developed on Earth. Vosnesensky's first and most important task was to see that those rules and regulations were carried out here on Mars.

Now the Russian turned from the gently humming air-circulation fans and the row of backup oxygen tanks

to see that his five team members had gathered around him. It was difficult to make out his face through the helmet visor, impossible to read his expression. In his barely accented American English he said, "All the gauges are in the normal range. It appears safe to get out of our suits."

Jamie recalled a physicist at Albuquerque, frustrated over an experiment that refused to work right, telling him, "All of physics boils down to reading a goddam dial on a goddam gauge."

Vosnesensky turned to Connors, the second-in-command. "Pete, the mission plan calls for you to test the air first."

The American chuckled nervously from inside his helmet. "Yeah, I'm the guinea pig, I know."

He took an exaggeratedly sighing breath that they could all hear in their earphones. Then, "Here goes."

Connors opened his helmet visor a crack, took a sniff, then slid the visor all the way up and pulled in a deeper breath. He broke into a toothy grin. "Helluva lot better than what's outside."

They all laughed and the tension cracked. Each of them pushed up their visors, then unlocked the neck seals of their suits and lifted their helmets off altogether. Jamie's ears popped, but nothing worse happened.

Ilona shook her short-clipped blonde curls and inhaled slowly, her slim nostrils flaring slightly. "Huh! It smells just like the training module. Too dry. Bad for the skin."

Jamie took a long look around their new home, now that his vision was no longer restricted by the helmet.

He saw the dome rising into shadowed gloom over his head, ribbed with curving metal struts. It reminded him of the first time he had gone into a planetarium, back when he'd been a kid in Santa Fe. The same hushed, awed feeling. The same soft coolness to the air. To Ilona the air felt too dry; to him it felt delicious.

The dome's smooth plastic skin had been darkened by a polarizing electric current to keep the heat inside.

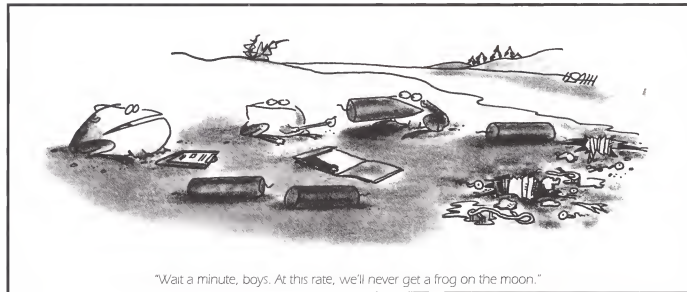
In daylight the dome's lower section would be made transparent to take advantage of solar heating, but at night it was like an oversized igloo sitting on the frozen Martian plain, darkened to retain heat and not allow it to radiate away into the thin, frigid Martian air. Strips of sunlight-equivalent fluorescent lamps lit the floor area softly, but the upper reaches of the dome were barely visible in the darkness gathering there.

The plastic skin of the dome was double walled, like insulating windows, to keep out the cold. The topmost section was opaque, filled in with a special dense plastic that would absorb harmful radiation and even stop small meteorites, according to the engineers. The thought of the dome getting punctured was scary. Patches and sealing compounds were placed along its perimeter, but would they have time to repair a puncture before all the air gushed out? Jamie remembered the hoary old joke of the parachute packers: "Don't worry about it. If this 'chute doesn't work, bring it back and we'll give you a new one."

The electric power that heated the dome came from the compact nuclear generator inside one of the cargo vehicles. Tomorrow, after the second team's landing, the construction robot was scheduled to extract the generator and bury it in the Martian soil half a kilometer from the dome.

Mustn't call it soil, Jamie reminded himself. Soil is alive with microorganisms and earthworms and other living creatures. Here on Mars it's called regolith, just like the totally dead surface of the totally dead Moon.

Is Mars really dead? Jamie asked himself. He remembered the stories he had read as a youngster, wild tales of Martians battling along their planet-girdling canals, beautiful fantasies of cities built like chess pieces and houses that turned to follow the sun like flowers. There were no canals on Mars, Jamie knew. No cities. But is the planet entirely lifeless? Are there fossils to be dug out of that red sand? ♦



"Wait a minute, boys. At this rate, we'll never get a frog on the moon."

Against the Night

Part 2 of 2

V. E. Mitchell

The story so far:

It is January 1946, and England has been battered by six and a half long years of war. Combined Operations, under the command of Commodore Lord Louis Mountbatten, is designing the secret weapon that will give the Allies final victory over the Nazis. The project, code-named Habbakuk, calls for constructing an immense aircraft carrier from ice mixed with wood pulp.

But the Nazis have learned of Habbakuk; Mountbatten receives a letter threatening to expose his wife Edwina as a Nazi spy unless he surrenders the plans. Mountbatten is furious; anyone familiar with Edwina's work to provide medical care for injured soldiers and civilians would know the accusation was preposterous. However, an interview with Captain John Torrance of English

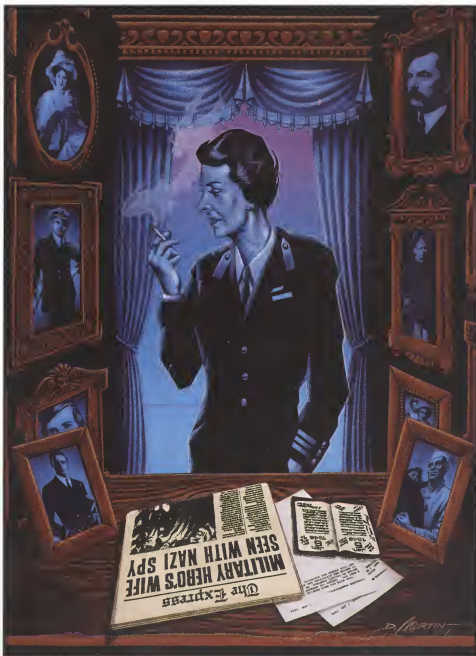


Illustration by David Martin

Army Intelligence is unsatisfactory; Torrance believes the charges against Edwina are true. As Mountbatten leaves his office for the night, he barely escapes being killed by a Nazi bomb.

Meanwhile, Edwina meets her beloved friend, Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of the independent Commonwealth of India. After he leaves Edwina, two men accost Nehru and demand that he tell Mountbatten to surrender Habbakuk. Nehru's response is to remain passive, saying and doing nothing.

When Edwina returns home late that night, Mountbatten asks her about the blackmail letter, but she can provide no clues to the person behind it. The conversation turns to her meeting with Nehru and to their dinner engagement with Prime Minister Winston Churchill the next evening.

As the Mountbattens and Nehru arrive at the PM's residence, someone throws two grenades at them. Edwina strikes her head on the pavement, but the men are uninjured. Torrance arrives, asks Nehru and Mountbatten about the attack, and all but accuses Nehru of throwing the grenades.

Mountbatten flies to Iceland for meetings concerning Habbakuk. On his return, his aide gives him a set of additional blackmail letters and tells him that Torrance has been more interested in investigating Edwina's prewar love affairs than he has been in locating the Nazi agent who is threatening Mountbatten. Angered at Torrance's misguided investigation, Mountbatten shows the letters to Brigadier Sir Geoffrey Blackstone, a friend of his father's. To Mountbatten's dismay, Blackstone suggests that Edwina's reputation for promiscuity is hurting his career and implies that he should divorce her. Under pressure, Blackstone promises to find out why Torrance has ignored the letters but insists that Mountbatten consider his advice.

When he tells Edwina of Blackstone's ultimatum, Mountbatten is stunned when she offers to leave. "How can you discuss this so calmly," he asks, "when just the thought is tearing me apart?" Reassured that he needs her, she promises that they will fight it out together. Their talk turns to business—the relief plans for Russian civilians liberated by the summer's campaign. The phone rings—a bomb has exploded in Nehru's office. The caller cannot provide any details, except that Intelligence has been called in to investigate the explosion.

"No one had better get in my way," Mountbatten says. "I'm going to set a new record getting down there."

Part Two

Nehru sat against the wall of the conference room, his legs clutched to his chest and his face hidden against his knees. Tears burned his eyes and soaked into his clothing, unheeded. Through the open door to his office, he was dimly aware of the security people moving around, examining things, discussing the explosion. After checking him for physical injuries and guiding him into the adjoining room, the guards had respected his privacy and no one approached.

His body rocked rhythmically, mindlessly, his thoughts trapped in an endless loop of horror. The smells—the coppery tang of blood, the sourness of vomit, the reek of fear—brought back memories of another shattered corpse, and his mind recycled the scene over and over. *Gandhiji. Oh, Gandhiji.* Again and again, the explosion replayed in his head, sometimes with Gandhi as victim, sometimes with Khan.

After a time, he became aware of stillness in the outer room, of suspended activity tensely awaiting a resolution. In the hall, he heard footsteps—a woman whose heeled pumps struck a hasty, forceful rhythm on the wood flooring. She stopped in the outer doorway, silent for the space of two long breaths while she surveyed the blood-splattered room and the rust-splotted sheet that covered the corpse. Then the footsteps resumed, softened by the carpet, coming toward him.

"God! Jawaharlal, if you wanted to redecorate the place, why didn't you just *tell* us?" Edwina asked in an exasperated tone.

Nehru's head jerked up as if she had slapped him. Edwina would never use that tone on him—but Edwina wasn't here—it was so late, Edwina must be home with Dickie—Dickie—Edwina—they couldn't be here, but he needed their strength so . . . The thoughts tumbled around in his mind, but he was unable to hold any of them long enough to regain his equilibrium. Like a helpless child, he searched her face, looking for guidance, for explanations to help him reorder a world gone suddenly insane.

Edwina knelt, facing him. "Jawaharlal," she murmured, her voice choked.

The tears started again. She reached for him and gratefully he buried his face against her breast. All the grief and pain and loss of the last years poured out of him in great, wracking sobs, unstoppable once his defenses were breached. Edwina held him, rocked him, comforted him until the storm passed.

Finally, his emotions exhausted, Nehru became aware of his surroundings. Edwina's body was warm and strong against his, and her arms were a safe haven to shelter his weakness, but he knew it could not last. He was in the India suite of Commonwealth House, his aide had just been murdered by a bomb, and someone would surely want to ask him questions very soon. Nehru stirred uneasily.

Edwina released him and sat back. "Are you all right now?" she asked in a voice thick with unshed tears.

Nehru nodded, not trusting his voice. He brushed his fingers against her face, tracing the contours of her high cheekbones, caressing the dark shadows that marred her beautiful eyes. Her eyelids closed for a moment and her breath came in ragged gasps. Nehru's world contracted until it held only the woman in front of him.

"Didn't I tell you what they'd be doing?" came a man's voice, triumphant and obnoxiously familiar, from the open doorway. The moment shattered. Nehru tore his attention from Edwina and looked up. Someone jerked Torrance backward. Mountbatten, with a face like the god of wrath, slammed the door shut.

Edwina stiffened and her face blanched. Before Nehru could react, she pulled away from him, turned, and then dropped to the floor beside him. "*Damn that bastard Torrance!*"

"What is it?" he asked when she did not continue. Nehru could feel the tremors running through her body and knew, even before she answered, that what she would tell him was so ugly he would not want to believe it of any man.

She rubbed her palms across her face and back over her hair, pulling her head back until she was looking at the ceiling. "*God! I need a cigarette!*"

Nehru reached for his cigarette case, took out one for each of them. Her hand, when she accepted the cigarette, was shaking badly. Nehru struck a match and held it for her, watched as she took a deep drag and exhaled a long stream of smoke. The match almost burned his fingers before he remembered to light his own cigarette.

After a long silence, Edwina told her story. When she finished, he wanted to crush her in his arms, to comfort her and love her until the pain left. And, at the same time, he felt so shamed and sickened and defiled that he wanted to crawl into the sewers to hide forever. In the end, Nehru did neither.

The door opened and Mountbatten escorted John Torrance into the room to question Nehru about the bombing. Torrance's face was chalky and he appeared deeply shaken. Mountbatten's face was flushed and his breathing rapid. Nehru guessed Mountbatten had read Torrance the riot act in terms so strong and precise that even Torrance's stubbornness could not mistake what had been said. For once, Nehru could not bring himself to condemn anger or threats as means of solving problems.

With both Mountbatten and Edwina present to keep the discussion focused on business, Torrance wasted little time questioning Nehru about the bombing. Nehru gave a terse account of Khan's arrival with the package and of the explosion, but knew little that could help trace the origin of the bomb. Torrance examined the office carefully, checking the physical evidence against Nehru's account, then beat a hasty retreat for more congenial localities.

One of Mountbatten's subordinates, looking battered and with his left arm in a blood-splotted, makeshift sling, entered the room as Torrance made good his escape. Mountbatten's expression turned grim and he gestured for Edwina and Nehru to leave without him. Captain Michaels, his words beginning to slur with shock, told Mountbatten about trailing a man from Torrance's office, of seeing the man deliver a box to Commonwealth House, and of catching a bullet when the man decided to use his gun to discourage Michaels from following him.

When Mountbatten joined Edwina and Nehru in Nehru's sitting room fifteen minutes later, his mood somber from what Michaels had told him, the tension between them was as thick as the smoke from Edwina's cigarettes. The dim light from a table lamp charitably concealed the room's tasteless decor, but made the space seem even

more claustrophobic than it really was. Edwina sat in one corner, silent, chain-smoking as she had since Torrance had appeared. All her defenses were in place, as hard and brittle as glass, and the damp shoulder of her blouse told Mountbatten much of what had passed between her and Nehru. Edwina watched with haunted eyes as Mountbatten crossed to the unoccupied chair, and he realized how close to the heart the attempt on Nehru's life had struck her.

Nehru sat opposite Edwina, watching her slightest move, radiating an anguish that resonated with hers. Mountbatten realized Nehru was balanced on the knife-edge between love and duty, drawn to his breaking point by the evening's events. *Both so fragile, so vulnerable*, Mountbatten thought, then angrily thrust the idea away. Both Nehru and Edwina were tough, steel-willed, but it was a toughness like tungsten steel, brittle when stressed the wrong way. And now both of them needed him, were depending on him for the strength and guidance and resilience that had been wrung from them. It sickened him that someone would use their feelings as a weapon against him, and he wondered who kept guiding Torrance's attacks toward the same raw, festering wound.

Nehru drew a deep, ragged breath and pointed toward his office with his thumb. "What was that about, Dickie?"

Mountbatten reached for a cigarette, fumbled for his matches, and then changed his mind and set both aside. How safe was it, he wondered, to answer Nehru's question? Michaels had been checking on John Torrance and had been shot when he stumbled across the assassination attempt against Nehru. Neither event made any sense unless Torrance was working from a private agenda, so Mountbatten felt his growing suspicions against Torrance were entirely justified. He clenched his fist, fighting against the tension and fear that twisted his stomach. For Nehru's safety, Mountbatten realized he dared not tell Nehru what was happening. It hurt to think his friend might believe Mountbatten no longer trusted him. "Michaels was investigating something for me. Some information related to a problem I've been having lately. Apparently he got too close."

Nehru nodded, as if Mountbatten had given him a detailed account. "Edwina told me some of it. From Torrance's reaction, one guesses that he . . . wanted very much . . . to catch Edwina and me in a . . . compromising position."

To stall for time, Mountbatten reached for the cigarette again. Some things were best not discussed, and the exact parameters of Nehru's relationship with Edwina belonged in that category. Now, however, Torrance's accusations were forcing the issue. What was the right thing to say? Mountbatten wondered. Having to assure the two people closest to him that he had always trusted them debased the coinage of his belief.

"I know damn well what Torrance wanted!" His anger at Torrance burst out despite his best intentions. Mountbatten took a long drag on the cigarette. "I have been in the navy for over three decades, Jawaharlal, and I've had some close escapes. I do understand how people react to such situations."

"The Sword of Death," Nehru murmured. "And the Word of Life."

"Yes," Mountbatten studied his friend's face, trying to interpret the complex skein of emotions that flickered across it. Clearly, although concern for Edwina was a raw-edged sore that Torrance had reopened, other burdens were also weighing on Nehru. And Edwina—when would she unleash the emotions she was hiding behind her mask? Mountbatten swallowed, tasting defeat. Schmidt knew him well, to choose so finely crafted a weapon. These two—beloved wife and beloved friend—were his hostages to fate, and with diabolical cunning Schmidt was escalating the pressure on them until Mountbatten yielded.

"Dickie," Nehru bowed his head, but not before Mountbatten saw the wetness glittering in his eyes. "Is it enough to tell you that what Torrance suggested was the farthest thing from my mind at that moment?"

Abruptly, Mountbatten stubbed out his cigarette and pushed himself to his feet. "You don't have to explain anything, now or ever," he said in a harsh voice. At the door, he turned back to Edwina. "I'm going to go check on Michaels, make sure he'll be all right until the ambulance comes. I'll be ready to leave in about ten minutes." He strode from the room, slamming the door.

Nehru stared after him, feeling stupid, knowing he had missed something obvious. "What did he mean?"

Edwina put out her cigarette. Her chair creaked as she got heavily to her feet. "He meant—I have ten minutes to decide if I can leave you tonight." She crossed the room, her motions jerky, her body taut with tension. "Hold me, Jawaharlal. Please hold me."

His better judgment shrieked alarms as he gathered her in his arms. How could he assume, even here in his own rooms, that they were safe from Torrance's prying? And he did want her now, he admitted to himself, wanted her with a need so deep, so overpowering, that it threatened to blot out all caution and sanity. Before his emotions erased the last shreds of reason, he withdrew from the embrace.

"My love. Edwina, my dearest, dearest love." Afraid to continue, he fell back on chivalry, pressing his lips into the palm of her hand. Her fingers slid upward, caressing his cheek. Nehru's blood thundered in his ears, and the gentle pressure of her hand against his throat intensified the pounding. A line of sweat trickled down his back. Fearing she would reach the depth of his need, he bowed his head. "Please, Edwina. I daren't bring any more danger to you and Dickie."

"I know." She pulled him close, kissed his closed eyelids, pressed a longer kiss to his lips. He shuddered from the effort to restrain himself. She rested her forehead against his shoulder, her tears burning through his shirt. "Why do you think he only gave us ten minutes, dear heart?"

Nehru shook his head, not trusting himself to answer. Even so, it took more strength of will than he had thought he possessed to let her walk out the door.

Despite the upheavals of the previous evening, Mount-

batten's Friday was filled with meetings and planning sessions to prepare the final presentations for Habbakuk. The afternoon staff meeting lasted until after six. When it finally broke up, Lawton was waiting for him with a folded copy of the *Express*. "I thought you should be warned about this as soon as possible."

Mountbatten unfolded the paper. Another dark, blurred picture filled the favored upper left corner. It was blazoned with the unoriginal headline: "Military leader's wife meets with Nazi spy." He examined the picture for clues. If the woman in the photograph was Edwina, the picture made her look closer to sixty than forty-five. Also, the woman's head was bent to examine something—a flower, perhaps—in her hand, making it doubly difficult to identify her. Her companion was a good advertisement for winter overgarments, but with the photograph shot over the man's shoulder from the rear, Mountbatten knew the picture could be of almost anyone. He thought he recognized one of the new convalescent hospitals in the background, which suggested the photo had been taken recently. That might help identify Schmidt, if they could pinpoint the time and place more precisely, but Mountbatten knew he had a more immediate problem to handle.

"Lawton, order my car at once. Then I want you to do some checking on this photograph."

The drive across London seemed endless. By the time he reached the house, Mountbatten was certain he could have walked the distance faster. He raced up the stairs, tossing his coat and umbrella at the footman as he entered. The servant's wary "Good evening, my lord" did little to reassure him; Edwina must already be home.

He tapped on the door to her study, but received no answer. Cautiously, he entered. A single lamp on the far side of the room provided the only light. It painted soft golden highlights on the walnut and maple furnishings. Edwina was sitting at her desk with her face buried in her hands. A burning cigarette was balanced on top of an already overflowing ashtray. She looked up at the sound of his footsteps, and he stopped, chilled by the deep pain lines furrowing her forehead and twisting her mouth. The worst possibility he could imagine was trying to discuss this while Edwina was suffering from a migraine.

"Just go away, Dickie," she began in a low, furious voice. "I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to think about it. Just leave me alone!"

"Edwina, darling—"

"Would you *please* go away!" Her voice took on an hysterical edge. "My head hurts and I don't want to discuss anything. I don't even want to think about the god-damned photograph!"

"Edwina, please—"

"Get out, Dickie! Go away and leave me alone!"

"Yes, Edwina." He closed the door and leaned against it, shaking in response to her outburst.

Mountbatten's valet appeared beside him. "My lord, you must get ready for your meeting tonight with the High Command."

He knew he could not miss the meeting. But what to

do about Edwina? "Thank you, Charles. I'll be right there." He entered his study and reached for the phone.

A frustrating ten minutes later, Mountbatten finally penetrated the bureaucratic net around Commonwealth House. "Jawaharlal, can you come to the house immediately?"

"That's a lovely thought, Dickie, but we're scheduled to fly out in the morning. You know what that means."

"Please. We need you. *Edwina* needs you. I'll do anything. I'll get them to reschedule your plane, if you'll just get here in the next half-hour."

"What's wrong?"

"This evening's *Express*."

"That scandal sheet? What have they done now?"

"They ran another photo they claim is Edwina."

"I'll be there at once."

The next telephone call was less satisfactory. Blackstone seemed determined to ignore Mountbatten's questions about the investigation. "Dickie, you must let us handle this in the proper manner. We're doing everything we can to keep this investigation as quiet as possible. It won't do for you to interfere with procedures. Surely you of all people must see that."

"I wouldn't dream of interfering," Mountbatten agreed with a dangerous mildness in his tone. "I'm merely asking for an immediate report on the security check you promised to run on your chap. Under the circumstances, I think you owe me that."

"I believe recent developments support the direction of his inquiries, Dickie. Surely you understand that this is not the time to weaken the thrust of our investigation."

"If you say so. However, I'm not satisfied, and I think Her Majesty might share my doubts."

Except for the crackle of static, the line was silent for several seconds. "As you wish, Dickie. I'll get you a full report within the next few days. However, I hope you haven't forgotten our discussion the other evening."

"Far from it." Mountbatten bit off the words, fighting against the pain Blackstone's words rekindled. Why, suddenly, was everybody attacking his wife? The question was important, he realized, but he put it aside to examine after he had finished with Blackstone. "I'm sure I'll find it easier to consider your . . . advice . . . after I've seen the report on Torrance."

"As you wish, Dickie. But opportunity rarely calls on the man who waits too long to make his decision."

"Of course not." Mountbatten broke the connection, unable to continue the discussion without mounting an ill-advised counterattack. He drew a deep breath, trying to expel his anger, and his question returned. Schmidt's slurs against Edwina appeared to have a motive—obtaining Habbakuk for the Nazis. Presumably Schmidt or an associate was the source for the photographs in the *Express*, although Mountbatten wondered why even as slipshod an operation as the *Express* would run such accusations without substantial proof to protect themselves against the National Security Board.

The real puzzler, though, was Blackstone. With all the resources of Army Intelligence at his command, he had chosen Torrance to investigate the threats against

Mountbatten. Given Torrance's known biases, any reasonable person would have predicted his investigation would be slow and misdirected, yet Blackstone continued to support him.

And then there was the implied order to divorce Edwina. Even if Mountbatten believed that Blackstone's advice was given with his best interests in mind, Blackstone's suggestion made no sense. The Navy's stated policy was that high officers should be immune to scandal in their private lives, but Mountbatten knew how often one was expected to ignore seven-pound accidents and weekend maneuvers in Chelsea. A divorce, however, with the legal requirement to show cause, was the worst possible—and the most public—scandal Mountbatten could imagine. Even in the old days, when they had had time for such diversions, he had been at great pains to avoid catching Edwina with her lovers, and she had shown the same consideration toward his affairs. His gut roiled and he tasted bile as he followed Blackstone's suggestion to its logical conclusion, the illicit rendezvous staged for the detectives of the aggrieved party. No, what Blackstone wanted was unthinkable, completely unacceptable no matter what the professional cost to Mountbatten. Besides, Mountbatten knew how short people's memories could be when it suited their purposes, and publicity was often a two-edged sword. If Schmidt was trying to revive old scandals to use against him and Edwina, perhaps it was time to launch a counterattack. A carefully placed story about Edwina's hospital work or an article telling of her efforts to rescue people after an air raid would remind many of how hard she was working for England and of how much her efforts were taken for granted. Having made his decision, Mountbatten still needed several minutes to organize his thoughts and prepare himself to resume the evening's schedule.

Mountbatten was ready to leave by the time Nehru arrived. They faced each other for a long silent moment before Nehru crossed the space between them and pulled Mountbatten into a hard embrace. Mountbatten returned it, feeling his world settle into perspective. Nehru's friendship and his affection for Edwina were the one haven of security Mountbatten had left.

Nehru stepped back. "How's Edwina?"

Mountbatten shook his head. "She won't talk to me. She's got one of her headaches, and I've got a meeting."

"I understand." Nehru shuddered, remembering how miserable and short-tempered Edwina's migraines made her.

They walked down the hall, with Nehru taking three steps to match two of Mountbatten's strides. Mountbatten opened the door and stepped aside, letting Nehru enter.

"Dickie, go away!" Edwina's face was buried in her hands, and she did not move when the door opened. Her voice carried a brittle ring of hysteria.

"Edwina." Nehru's voice was low and warm, projecting all his love for her.

"Jawaharlal?" She lowered her hands and looked toward the door with a puzzled, searching expression on her face.

Nehru squeezed Mountbatten's arm, then started across

the room. "Yes, Edwina. I am here." She turned her head to follow the sound of his footsteps, and Mountbatten realized she had her eyes tightly closed against the light. Nehru reached her side and took her in his arms, gently, as he might comfort a hurt child.

Mountbatten pulled the door shut, knowing he could not leave Edwina in better hands. In any case, his immediate concern had to be fielding questions from the Allied High Command on Habbakuk. If he allowed his personal concerns to destroy the project now, Schmidt would achieve his objective. And, Mountbatten knew well, failure was the one thing for which Edwina would never forgive him.

It was late when the meeting finished and Mountbatten returned home. He entered the house, throwing his coat at the rack and dumping his papers on his desk. A light showed under the door of Edwina's office. He tapped on the door, barely loud enough to be heard.

Nehru opened the door. His face was haggard and his dark eyes were shadowed with strain. "She's upstairs, asleep," he said in a low voice.

Mountbatten stepped into the room. "I apologize for making you deal with that. I hope it wasn't too bad."

"She's not taking it well." Nehru crossed the room with half a dozen jerky strides and perched on the edge of the desk, fidgeting with one of the photographs displayed there. "I would talk with you about this, Dickie."

Mountbatten heard the tension in Nehru's voice. He swallowed to loosen the tightness in his throat and forced himself to walk calmly to a chair and sit down. "What is it?" he asked, reaching for an emotional stillness he was far from feeling.

Nehru fiddled with the picture he was holding, in no hurry to speak. He seemed fascinated by the photograph of the Mountbattens' eldest daughter. At last, Nehru looked over at Mountbatten. "Patricia is very beautiful. I imagine Edwina must have looked much like that when she was the same age."

Mountbatten blinked, puzzled by the direction of Nehru's comment. "Yes, she does take after her mother."

Nehru rubbed a hand across his cheek. "Edwina told me about her mother. And her grandmother. They both died before they were forty. That picture in the paper upset her a great deal."

"There was a resemblance, but I'm not convinced it was Edwina."

"It was. She recognized when it was taken. I recognize it, too. And that photo makes her look *old*. It makes her look my age." Nehru forced a smile, trying to lighten the tone of the conversation.

"Twelve years older?" Mountbatten's shrug dismissed the difference. "What does that have to do with it?"

"The women in her family don't live that long. She's terrified. As though she'd just read her obituary."

"Oh, my God." Mountbatten's perspective tilted and he shuddered as the scene with Edwina assumed a terrible logical clarity. "I should have realized."

Nehru drew a deep breath. "At the risk of sounding melodramatic, I am very afraid for her. You don't see it

—you're around her all the time—but every time I come to England, she is more exhausted, more depleted. You must keep her from working so hard."

"How?" Mountbatten asked in a soft voice. "How do you stop the tide from flowing or the rivers from flooding? She's fighting this war as completely as any soldier at the front, and she sees her enemy at much closer quarters than most of them."

"There are limits, Dickie. She can't keep up the pace. It will kill her."

The words hung in the air like the tolling of a church bell. Mountbatten tried to speak and found his throat was too tight for the words to come out. Nehru had said nothing new, but Mountbatten had tried to ignore the tremendous cost of Edwina's war work. Each inspection tour, each round of fund-raising efforts for the hospitals and to obtain vital supplies, and now the extended planning sessions for the relief of the soon-to-be liberated Russian civilians, left her more exhausted, closer to the breaking point. But Edwina projected an aura of boundless vitality, and her passion for what she was doing was contagious. Mountbatten realized he had been carried along by her conviction, had seen how hard she drove herself but had not thought to question the physical toll her demanding schedule had exacted. Unbidden, the comparison he should have made came to mind—his destroyer, the *H.M.S. Kelly*, torpedoed by Nazi dive-bombers, going down with all guns firing.

The silence stretched as Mountbatten tried to frame an appropriate answer to Nehru's words. At last, he shook his head. "Isn't there any way you can convince her, Jawaharlal?" He closed his eyes, letting his exhaustion and need show in his voice. "I can't manage without her."

Nehru froze. Mountbatten never exposed his emotions so openly. The room tilted, then slowly swung back to normal. Nehru set the picture on the desk with a click that sounded like a gunshot in the quiet room. "Of course. It's obvious."

"What?"

Nehru took a deep breath, nodding to himself. "This whole thing doesn't make any sense. How could the Nazis expect to get anything from you by *threatening* to expose Edwina as a Nazi agent? Even with 'evidence' like that photograph? At best, for such tactics to work, they'd have to sacrifice one of their agents, and he'd have to be an important one to make it believable."

"It still might not work. They'd have to prove she'd given their agent secrets. And with her being in public so much, doing so much for the hospitals, it would be hard to make a convincing case for her being a traitor." ♦

Nehru nodded. "Photographs like that one today, without proof, are just harassment. You two have weathered worse scandals, and anonymous accusations really don't carry that much weight."

"I'm not so sure. England's mood toward traitors is pretty ugly these days."

"True. But Mr. Churchill kept you around after what you did in India, so he's not going to throw you to the wolves now."

"Don't bet on it. If it hadn't been for Edwina, he might

have washed his hands of me then." Mountbatten shuddered, remembering Churchill's rage when he had insisted that England must grant India her independence immediately. Churchill had replied that Mountbatten's job was to organize Indian participation in the war effort, not to dismember England's Empire. All of Mountbatten's arguments had fallen on deaf ears, and to this day, he still did not know what Edwina had said to change Churchill's mind.

Nehru smiled at the tribute to Edwina's persuasiveness. "Churchill's opinion of her is higher than ever. I saw that the other night. Attacking her *won't* carry any weight in that quarter. No, Dickie, the intent is something entirely different." He paused, trying to organize his thoughts with the clarity he needed. "They're trying to get to you by destroying Edwina. If she breaks, if this pushes her over the edge—that's what they're trying for. It would take four people to do what she's taken on herself to do, but having to replace her wouldn't cripple the war effort. However, if she goes, and it takes you time to deal with it . . ." Nehru paused, chewing on his lower lip. "Does the word 'Habbakuk' mean something to you?"

Mountbatten stiffened. "What—? How?"

Seeing Mountbatten's reaction, Nehru raised a hand to forestall questions. "Someone used it to—to threaten me. The day—the day that photograph was taken. I'm so sorry, Dickie. Even if I had known how important it was, I never saw the man and I could not identify him." He bowed his head, unable to face Mountbatten with this admission of failure. The silence stretched, finally broken by the crackle of Mountbatten picking up the newspaper.

"Is that you with her?" Mountbatten asked, his voice barely audible. As he smoothed the page, he could almost hear his enemy laughing in triumph. In spite of Nehru's earlier statement, he had almost convinced himself that the woman in the photograph was not Edwina. However, if he mentally replaced the nondescript overcoat and hat with the familiar Congress cap and vest, the slight, dark-skinned man in the photo bore a striking resemblance to Nehru. Mountbatten crushed the paper, trying to control the fear that knotted his stomach. Not one but two of the most important people in his world were threatened by this latest attack. And enough people in England still had doubts about the wisdom of Indian independence for them to believe Nehru was a Nazi spy. Given that, anything was possible. "Were you with her?"

Nehru nodded, still not looking up. "Yes. At the St. Bartholomew's dedication. . . . Dickie, I don't know what you're doing and I don't want to know. However, it must be important. I've seen you work and I know your abilities. You would not be doing a trivial job. Obviously, someone is trying to neutralize you."

"If you're right, if that's what this is about—" Mountbatten rubbed a hand across his face. The knot in his stomach tightened. He knew how much he needed Edwina and how little of the situation he could control. So far, his attempts to investigate the problem had turned up little information and had gotten a valued subordinate injured. At least, after tomorrow, Nehru would return to

India and Schmidt would have one less hostage to use against him. "God! I know you're right, Jawaharlal. It's obvious now that you've pointed it out. But I can't stop loving her. And I can't make her give up her work. That would be worse than the way things are now."

Both men were silent, thinking of Edwina with no outlet for her energy or organizational talents while the rest of England fought the war. Finally, Nehru spoke. "If only she wouldn't do so much. . . . I asked her to come with me to India. Now, Nan and Indira would love to have her visit for a couple of months." He shrugged. "She wouldn't even discuss it."

"I suppose not. She sees her work as a one-woman crusade against the Nazi war machine. I've tried, but I don't know what to say any more. She *won't* slow down."

"I don't know if I can help," Nehru nodded his head toward Edwina's bedroom, "but I would be with her when she wakes."

"Of course," Mountbatten's throat tightened as he realized the love—for both of them—that lay behind the offer. He stood and crossed to the desk, grasping Nehru's shoulder with his hand. "Thank you, Jawaharlal. I appreciate it more than you know."

Nehru gave him a small, shaky smile and returned the pressure. "I have a stake in this, too, Dickie. I would find the world a very empty place if I could not share it with Edwina."

Mountbatten tightened his grip for a moment. "It's getting late and I have a critical meeting in the morning. I'll say good night now, if you don't mind."

"Of course not. I'll see you at breakfast, then."

Mountbatten let himself out of the room. The floor swayed under him as if he were at sea in a heavy storm. He braced his legs against the next roll, searching for the equilibrium point in this ocean of changes. When he found it, he started for his study, feeling old and drained.

Mountbatten was halfway through breakfast before Edwina and Nehru entered. Nehru, his arm around Edwina's waist, looked surprisingly rested in spite of his long vigil. Edwina moved with an uncharacteristic hesitancy, as if uncertain of the exact location of the floor, and Mountbatten forced his thoughts away from how heavily she leaned against Nehru for support. "Good morning, Edwina, Jawaharlal. I was afraid I would be gone before you were up."

Edwina leaned over to kiss his forehead before taking her seat. "Nonsense, Dickie. You're not the only one with work to do today."

"Are you sure you feel up to it, darling?" Mountbatten's eyes sought Nehru's, asking for his opinion.

Nehru gave a small shrug, and Mountbatten's worry solidified. Edwina had also refused to discuss her health with Nehru, although both men could see that she was far from well.

"Of course I'm up to it." Edwina reached for a cup of coffee and her cigarettes. "Besides, the Nazis aren't going to call off the war just because I have a headache."

"That's your answer, then—to continue as if nothing has happened?"

"Nothing *has* happened. Unless you decide to believe the story and throw me out for consorting with a Nazi spy."

"Certainly not on the word of the *Express*." This morning was not the time to discuss the other implications of the *Express* photograph.

"Dickie, Edwina, I apologize for interrupting, but I must be leaving."

"Of course, Jawaharlal." Mountbatten stood. "I'll make sure the car is ready."

By the time he got back, Nehru and Edwina had made their farewells. Nehru was waiting for him at the front door. Mountbatten clasped his hand, drawing support from Nehru's strong grip. "Thank you for everything, Jawaharlal. I don't know what either of us would do without your friendship."

"I wish I could have done more." Nehru glanced toward the dining room, his face drawn with worry. "If either of you need it, there'll always be a place for you in Delhi."

"Thank you. Though I pray our next visit will be for happier reasons."

"Am I permitted to ask what you think will come of this?"

"As long as you don't expect a good answer." Mountbatten leaned against the wall, staring at the ceiling. "In the worst possible case, you, I, and Edwina will be arrested in the next five minutes as Nazi collaborators. In the best case, the matter will be dropped for the absurdity it is and we've already heard the last of it."

Nehru forced a smile. "Realistically, Dickie, you don't expect either of those things to happen."

Mountbatten met Nehru's troubled eyes. "Realistically, we're in for some rough seas, even if they catch this 'Schmidt' soon. As you've guessed, the Nazis are trying to destroy my most important project." He drew in a deep breath. "Beyond that, Edwina will exhaust herself with her hospital work, no matter what I say, and I will have to fight to keep the Admiralty from posting me to some obscure corner of the Empire for the duration. But in six months, the whole thing will be forgotten."

"Dickie, Edwina is not that strong. All she's got left is willpower. What if she doesn't have six months?" Nehru turned toward the door so Mountbatten would not see the tears in his eyes.

"We must believe she has the strength." Mountbatten's voice was harsh, ragged from the knowledge he was fighting a losing battle. "Staying out of things is harder on her than all the work she does. You know that."

"Yes, I know." Nehru's voice broke. He pulled open the door and walked out into the cold, foggy English morning, his step heavy, his shoulders sagging in defeat.

Mountbatten met Edwina coming out of the dining room. In the last few minutes, she had disciplined her body with the same ruthlessness she used on inefficient hospital administrators. If he had not seen her earlier, her regal bearing and controlled energy would have fooled even him. As it was, her performance awed him and Mountbatten felt his throat tighten with his love. "Going already?"

She nodded. "I'm late. And today's schedule is too full to rearrange." She swept from the room, leaving him to stare at the empty space where she had been.

Mountbatten spent the next two days buried in work, organizing every last detail of his Habbakuk presentation. He hoped that if he ignored the outside world, it would return the favor. Edwina seemed to be operating on the same strategy and he barely saw her. The furor over the second picture in the *Express* was less than he expected. Apparently Lawton's sentiments were shared by much of England and most people were too weary to respond to questionable photographs and vague allegations. However, Mountbatten had no illusions about how long the seeming indifference would continue; more specific accusations would surely provoke overt, violent hostility. He felt his nerves grow tighter with each passing hour, as he wondered where the next attack would strike. On Thursday, Schmidt's deadline passed with no apparent incident, leaving Mountbatten to wonder what might be happening where he had no friends to report the damage. If Schmidt's threats were indeed part of a plan to scuttle Habbakuk, the next move would have to come soon. Mountbatten remembered all too keenly the anti-German slander campaign that had forced his father to resign from the Navy during the Great War, and the parallels were beginning to make him believe that Schmidt was a student of history. Also, Mountbatten was tiring of the craven attacks against his loved ones and wished his enemy would confront him man to man.

He spent Sunday afternoon preparing for the final meeting on Habbakuk. While his presentation was largely a formality, Mountbatten knew the project could still be denied approval if what he said contradicted previous information or if he failed to answer critical questions. He reviewed the data with his staff until he was certain even the most hostile adversary could not shake his facts.

It was late when he arrived home, and the house seemed deserted. At first, he thought Edwina was still out, but as he passed the open sitting room door, the dull glow of a cigarette caught his eye. He entered the room and closed the door, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light.

"Are you all right, darling?" he asked in a low voice.

The cigarette's tip moved to the side, toward the vague bulk of the end table. "Just tired." Her voice was flat.

Mountbatten's throat tightened with concern for her. He picked his way across the room and sat beside her on the sofa, slipping his arm around her shoulders. "What's wrong? Tell me about it?"

She gave a small shrug. "Everywhere I go, I feel people watching. I feel them wondering, 'Is it true?' She always did have a reputation. And there was that scandal about the Negro. If someone would do that, they might do anything."

"Edwina, that was years ago and we won the libel case. Remember? Everyone's forgotten except you."

"You think people won't remember? This is the same thing all over again, but if I take the time from my work to fight it, they'll have won anyway. The time I would

spend in the courtroom is time I can't spend helping the wounded. And a libel case against the *Express* would ensure all of England heard the accusations." She shuddered and continued in a bleak tone. "What does it matter? There's no way out of this one."

Mountbatten pulled her close, feeling the tension in her body. Gently, he kissed the top of her head. "There is a way out, and we'll find it. I promise."

Her snort trailed off into a whimper. She rubbed a fist across her cheeks. "I wish Jawaharlal were here. He knows what to say to make the darkness go away."

He rocked her gently for a time, trying to school his own emotions to the calmness and strength Edwina needed from him. Her despair and pain tore at him, made him long to carry her away to a safe haven where they could play forever, where no responsibilities and no suspicions could intrude. She stirred in his arms and he realized with uncharacteristic bitterness that they were both years past any such escape. He brushed a lock of hair away from her face, feeling helplessly inadequate to comfort her. "I wish he were here, too, darling. If you want, we can chuck the whole thing and go out to India like he asked."

"No." She moved her head against his chest, denying the possibility. "What happens to England when her leaders run away?" She shrugged, a brief, hopeless motion. "Oh, I've still got enough money to support us anywhere in the world for a long time to come. But if we walk out on our duties here, where can we hide from ourselves?"

Mountbatten trailed a line of kisses across her forehead. "You do have a damnable way of being right. What do you propose to do?"

"What can I do? I must rise above it, I suppose. . . ." Edwina's voice faded, then picked up with a different train of thought. "You know, there are times when I think about you designing landing craft, planning your aircraft carrier, and creating all that other equipment that will get more men killed, and I look at the wounded in whatever hospital I'm inspecting—and I hate you, and I hate the Nazis, and I hate this whole goddamned war." Her body convulsed with sobs.

Mountbatten held her until her crying stopped. "I don't like the war any better than you do. But I didn't start it and I wouldn't like the way the Nazis want to finish it."

She straightened and slipped free of his arm. "I know that, Dickie. But tonight that doesn't make things any easier. And if I were what the paper said, if I *were* helping the Nazis, I would be prolonging this. I would be murdering more innocent people."

"And that's what the problem is," Mountbatten murmured to himself. He felt the tears burn his eyes as he realized how deeply the accusation had wounded her. "To spend so much time fighting death and then to be accused of causing it."

Edwina stood and brushed her skirt straight. "So you see, Dickie, there aren't any answers. The truth simply doesn't matter, because defending myself steals time and energy from the only thing that makes a difference now. The Nazis can't lose with this attack."

Mountbatten took her hand and pressed it to his lips. "Edwina. My darling. I'll find a way out of this, for both of us. Just give me a couple of days to figure it out."

"Of course. What am I thinking of?" Her laugh was choked with tears. "Here I am, making a horribly melodramatic scene and feeling *sooo* sorry for myself, when you've got much more important things to worry about." She swallowed and continued in a calmer tone. "Dickie, what I do is important, but what you're doing will bring the war to the soonest possible end. Please forget everything I said this evening and concentrate on your job. I am tired, and I let my emotions get out of control. It won't happen again. I know my duty to England and the war effort, and I won't let my personal difficulties interfere." She crossed the room with a dozen quick strides. At the door, she turned toward him. "I love you, Dickie Mountbatten," she said, and was gone before he could respond.

He stared at the bright rectangle of light from the hallway for several minutes, trying to decide whether it hurt more to see the deep wounds on Edwina's soul or to watch her hide again behind her indomitable will and her armor of self-imposed expectations. He reached over to the end table and fumbled for one of her cigarettes, needing something to occupy his hands while his mind shuttled between clusters of unpalatable thoughts. In spite of his supreme confidence that he could succeed at anything he tried, he knew he would find no easy solution to this problem and no comfortable way to keep his promise.

The final meeting for Habbakuk was scheduled for Monday morning. Mountbatten's staff car pulled up before the Allied Headquarters in good time. The white marble building, with its broad, columned stairway and sheer walls, reminded Mountbatten of a fortress. The effect was heightened by the armed guards flanking the door. The house had once been the London home of the Earl of Southwold, but it had not fared well since the death of its owners in the first year of the war. However, its location across town from London's major military targets had recommended it to the Americans after the rocket attacks of late 1944 had destroyed their previous headquarters.

Mountbatten got out of the car, pausing to tell Browne, his driver, when his next appointment was. As he straightened and swung the door closed, a shot rang out. Something burned a line across Mountbatten's back. Instinctively, he swung toward the sound. Twenty paces away, a man in a Military Intelligence uniform was lowering his Webley from the recoil of the first shot. Something in the man's posture seemed familiar, but Mountbatten did not wait to identify his attacker. He dived for cover behind the car. The Webley's second shot *spanged* across the car's bonnet a split second after Mountbatten disappeared behind it. As he hit the ground, Mountbatten found himself wishing a command officer's dress uniform included a sidearm.

A double burst of fire erupted from the guards' rifles and, much nearer, the comforting report of Browne's

Wheley. "Got him!" one of the guards shouted, then continued in a quieter tone, "Cover me while I check him."

Mountbatten stood, brushing the dirt from his uniform. Browne appeared at his side. "My lord, you must get inside."

"Nonsense. I want to know who was taking shots at me and why." He started for the cluster of soldiers that had materialized around the body of his attacker, thinking that one never realized how heavily protected the Allied HQ was until something brought all the guards out at one time. The group parted to let him through.

The man on the sidewalk was John Torrance. Up close, Mountbatten had no trouble recognizing him, in spite of the wig and the false mustache he wore. At least three shots had hit Torrance, and his chest was a bloody ruin. Mountbatten turned away, sickened at the sight. For the moment, he could not summon any anger that Torrance had meant a similar fate for him. The idea of someone shooting at him was too preposterous for Mountbatten to accept, even though his back was beginning to smart where Torrance's first bullet had creased it.

"My lord, you must get inside," Browne repeated. "And if you don't hurry, you'll be late for your meeting."

"The meeting!" Mountbatten glanced down, assessing the dirt smudges on his white uniform. He always kept a spare uniform at HQ, but he barely had time to get his wound dressed and change into the clean uniform before the meeting started. The mystery of Torrance's attack would have to wait until later. He started for the building at the fastest speed his dignity would allow, with Browne pacing him on his streetward side. "Thank you, Browne," he said, both for the reminder and for his quick shooting.

"Any time, my lord."

Mountbatten mounted the stairs two at a time. At the door, he turned back to Browne. "The afternoon schedule is unchanged. Be out here at 1600."

"Yes, my lord."

The decision on Habbakuk was made in an atmosphere of charged apprehension. Word had spread about the attack on Mountbatten, but that did not make the meeting go any easier. The Allied High Command grilled Mountbatten for five hours, requesting amplification of every technical problem and rehashing every objection that had ever been raised about the project. For several of the English commanders, a giant aircraft carrier made of ice and wood pulp was too radical a concept for them to accept easily, while some of the Americans questioned the wisdom of committing the huge quantities of steel and manpower required to build the ship. Knowing that the questions were mostly formality, a ritual that he had to endure one last time before the decision was announced, did little for Mountbatten's spirits. His chance to command the *St. George* was at stake, and by the time he left the meeting, he felt as limp and used as an old surgical dressing. His back, which he had not noticed during the meeting, throbbed as though an antiaircraft battery was pummeling it.

Fifteen minutes later, as he was finishing a cup of tea

in the mess room before going to his next appointment, Blackstone joined him. To Mountbatten, Blackstone seemed edgy and his manner forced. "That was an impressive show, Dickie. You certainly had your facts organized."

"Thank you, sir." Mountbatten felt the tiredness of defeat settle over him. What could have gone wrong? With an opening like that, Blackstone could hardly be bringing good news.

"Ismay was extremely impressed with your timetable. It seems your outfit has mapped out the course of the European theatre for the next year."

"Thank you, Sir Geoffrey," Mountbatten replied without thinking. Then Blackstone's words penetrated. "If we've planned the war for the next year, why are you acting as though you're bringing bad news?"

"I know how much you wanted to command the *St. George*, Dickie. But the PM was adamant that we should not consider you." Blackstone shrugged. "You know your record with ships isn't the best, but other commanders have lost ships in the line of duty. I suppose it's really the flap over this spy thing. I can't think what else it would be. The Americans are terribly worried at present about even the smallest of security breaches. Too bad you didn't decide soon enough take my advice to cut your losses."

Mountbatten slammed his empty cup onto the table and stood, letting the anger wash away his tiredness. Of all the people in England, Churchill was the last person he would have expected to condemn him for the *Express*'s accusations against Edwina. "I guess it's lucky my next meeting is with the PM. I'll ask him to justify his decision."

"You needn't be so short-tempered, Dickie. I'm sure the order has nothing to do with your abilities."

Mountbatten scowled, sensing that Blackstone was thoroughly pleased with Churchill's directive. However, it seemed less than politic to say so at the moment.

Blackstone shrugged. His manner was casual, but his eyes never left Mountbatten's face. "The fortunes of war and all that, Dickie. By the way, it seems I owe you an apology about Torrance."

"What?"

"After your man sent over his research on the photographs in the *Express*, I had Torrance's references checked again. Not just the records, but some of his schoolmates, beyond what we'd usually do. I just got the report a few minutes ago. It seems John Torrance died in Spain in '36. The man who's been seeing your sister-in-law is a Nazi agent. I'm sorry we didn't catch him before he tried to pot you. You're too valuable an officer to lose that way."

"My God." Mountbatten felt the room swim in and out of focus. With Blackstone's words, Torrance's attempt on his life became understandable and, somehow, more frightening. "I suspected him of listening too closely to Marie's anti-Indian sentiments and of trying to divert the investigation from the real issue, but I never imagined he was Schmidt."

"Nor did we. You should be flattered, Dickie. The

Nazis thought you and Edwina were important enough to expend considerable effort to discredit you."

"Oh, I am flattered, all right. What else was Torrance doing while he was waiting to get me?"

"We're working on that. And believe me, we'll know before we're finished. I am sorry it destroyed your chance at the *St. George*."

"We'll see what the PM says." Mountbatten started for the door, moving with rapid, angry strides that belied his previous exhaustion. "I haven't given up yet!"

Before he reached the door, it opened. Michaels, his arm still in a sling, and three MPs were in the hall.

Michaels gestured to him, a signal which meant, "Duck fast!" Behind him, Mountbatten heard someone cocking a gun.

Mountbatten dived for the door. He cleared the door frame, rolled to the side, and bounced to his feet. The bullet from Blackstone's gun hit one MP in the shoulder and the man went down. The other two MPs fired into the mess room. Mountbatten heard the thud and metallic clatter of a heavy body falling sideways from a folding chair.

Cautiously, Mountbatten approached the door and looked in. Blackstone was sprawled on the floor, dead. "What?" Mountbatten asked.

Michaels took Mountbatten's arm and pulled him away. "They're not sure if he was the brains or the dupe, my lord. Personally, I think Torrance was the brains and that he bribed or blackmailed the brigadier into covering up for him."

"But, why—?" Mountbatten pointed his thumb toward the mess room. "All he had to do was keep quiet after Torrance was shot. His apology for not catching him sooner was quite convincing."

"That I can answer." Michaels's face lit with satisfaction. "It was a trap, my lord. Blackstone thought Torrance was still alive and was going to implicate him. Also, Torrance apparently had convinced Blackstone that another agent would take him out if he didn't get you. We were supposed to be in position when he arrived, so we could take him in for questioning. He must have guessed that something was afoot and then panicked when he saw us."

"I see. And may I ask what you were doing along on this escapade?"

"Protecting my commanding officer, of course. My lord." Michaels grinned, then sobered. "Also to see if I could identify him as the person who winged me. Not, I suppose, that it matters any more."

"No, I suppose not. Was he?"

Michaels glanced over his shoulder, as if expecting his unidentified assailant to be creeping up behind him. "I don't know, my lord. And that's the honest truth."

Mountbatten grimaced. It would have been neat and pretty to have tied up Schmidt's gang in one afternoon's work, but he supposed that was asking for too much. With the mastermind gone, they would probably never know who else had been involved nor why the Nazis had felt compelled to expend so much effort to neutralize Mountbatten.

* * *

"What's the matter, Dickie? Cat got your tongue?" Winston Churchill swiveled his chair toward the door as Mountbatten entered. "I rather expected you to come boiling through that door in high dudgeon because you didn't get command of that ice ship of yours."

Mountbatten crossed the room with all the control he could muster and took the chair in front of the desk. The injustice of the situation pained him deeply, knowing Churchill had based his decision on information supplied by a spy and a traitor. "I do feel you owe me an explanation, sir," he said with rigid formality. "If it's because of the recent slanders against Edwina, I doubly protest your decision."

Churchill chuckled. "I've known Edwina a long time, Dickie. Quite long enough to disbelieve so blatant a lie as the one to which you are referring. Your wife's a damn fine woman, and she's got brains enough to make two of you. There are times, Dickie, when you have more luck than you deserve." He paused, eyes twinkling with the mischief of an oversized leprechaun, to wait for Mountbatten's response.

For a moment, Mountbatten did not know what to say. Blackstone had primed him with misinformation, setting him up for an unnecessary confrontation. If Churchill had ordered the High Command not to consider him for command of the *St. George*, it was because the Prime Minister had something else up his sleeve. And Edwina—where did she fit in, especially after Churchill's warm tribute? Mountbatten shook himself, realizing Churchill was still waiting for a response. "I agree with you completely, sir. No man could have a better wife than Edwina."

Apparently satisfied with Mountbatten's answer, Churchill continued, "In any case, I've already heard the full story. The *Express* will print a retraction tomorrow, and later in the week they'll be asked to donate their next paper allotment to the war effort. I believe the *St. George* needs a few tons of wood pulp for its construction." He chewed on the butt of his cigar, studying Mountbatten with a Cheshire-cat grin on his round face. "If I was going to hold anything Edwina did against you, it would be her coaching of that Indian fellow."

"I beg your pardon, sir?" Mountbatten asked, although he had a good idea what Churchill meant.

"Mr. Nehru. Do you think I didn't realize how well she rehearsed him? Unfortunately, he still made a lot of sense, even if he is an Indian."

"I'm afraid I had very little time to see Mr. Nehru when he was in England for this last visit. At least, not when we weren't preoccupied with other matters." *Such as life and death.* With a pang, he realized they had not found time for even one rambling, all-night discussion where he and Nehru and Edwina solved all the world's problems—and everyone lived happily ever after. "I don't know what Edwina said to Mr. Nehru."

"What's more to the point is what he and I discussed." Churchill leaned back in his seat, watching Mountbatten with the air of a Magus about to dispense the Twelfth Night gifts.

Mountbatten spoke when it became clear Churchill

expected him to ask. "Very well, sir. What *did* you and Mr. Nehru talk about?"

Churchill's grin widened. "The new supreme commander for Southeast Asia. Wavell's holding the line at India, but that's not good enough. We need someone who can push the Japanese back into their islands and trap them against the American advance."

"Where do I fit in?" Southeast Asia would be a big assignment and Mountbatten knew a dozen senior officers who would view it as the crowning achievement of their careers. Even with the overwhelming problems from the monsoons and the malaria, the low morale of the "Forgotten Army," and the difficulty of getting a distant War Office to send the needed supplies, the command would be eagerly sought.

"You're it, Dickie."

"Me? Why?" It was too much for Mountbatten to take in at once. He was a junior naval officer; most of the commanders in Southeast Asia were at least ten years his senior.

"You're reckless with your ships, Dickie. They take too much damage when you're in command." Churchill stabbed the air with his cigar. "We can't afford to have the *St. George* shot out from under you. Besides, you're far too good with people to waste on a bloody iceberg. The Americans like you, which is a big plus, since you'll have to work closely with them. And Mr. Nehru was most enthusiastic about your abilities. He says half of India still sees you as a demigod because you're the Queen's uncle. You don't know how difficult it is to find someone who's acceptable to the Americans *and* the Indians."

"I'm honored, sir. I don't know quite what to say."

"You'd bloody well better say you'll accept the job. I don't know of anyone else who can handle it, and they tell me your present assignment is winding down now that they've approved your iceberg ship."

"That's true, sir."

"There's another factor. Thousands of our people are being held prisoner by the Japanese. I can't order Edwina out there, but her abilities will be sorely needed once you reconquer our territories. I can think of no one better suited to organize the necessary relief and rescue efforts."

"I understand, sir. May I give you my answer tomorrow after I've had time to consider it?" Even as he said the words, Mountbatten knew he would accept the job. It was too big a challenge to refuse, and Edwina would

feel the same about the role Churchill was asking of her. Then he felt a surge of relief as he realized the assignment offered him a way to keep his promise to Edwina. If he took the Southeast Asia command, they would be able to stay together and to continue their respective efforts for the Allied cause. By the time the war in the Pacific was over, everyone would have forgotten the photograph and the allegations in the *Express*.

"Of course, Admiral Mountbatten." Churchill's grin and the new title told Mountbatten the Prime Minister had already anticipated his decision. "And if Edwina is worried about repercussions from that newspaper article, tell her this will get her off the firing line until that nonsense is forgotten. I can't afford to let the two of you squander your energies fighting such foolishness. I just wish the Army had organizers as efficient as Edwina."

"Thank you, sir. I'll be sure to tell her."

Driving away from Churchill's office, Mountbatten tried to sort out his reactions to the day. Torrance's attack and Blackstone's betrayal, monstrous though they were, were minor compared with everything else that had happened that afternoon. With the threat to Edwina gone, Mountbatten could put the entire affair behind him. He had more important matters to occupy his thoughts. His mood swung between elation at the new assignment, triumph at being chosen over officers ten and fifteen years his senior, and disappointment at losing his chance to command the *St. George*. After waiting so long to get back to sea, the loss was doubly disappointing. Supreme command of the Southeast Asia forces would be a daunting challenge. However, to refuse the assignment would be an admission that he could not handle the job, and *that* was something he would never concede. There would be another naval command for him, though perhaps not until after the war ended. For now, he was a soldier and he had an enemy to defeat.

He turned that thought over in his mind, examining it from several angles. Slowly, the significance of his new assignment dawned on him and a sense of deepest joy swept over him. *India!* He and Edwina were going back out to India. As he thought of the welcome that waited for them there, from the people of India and from Nehru, he knew that accepting the assignment was the *right* thing to do. With himself and Edwina and Nehru working together, they could accomplish anything. The Japanese were about to meet their match. ♦

The Key

Grant Carrington

They worked in a dingy basement near Dupont Circle in Washington. Once they had been respected scientists but now they were just another handful of gray people in a city full of gray people, gray-haired and white-bearded. They were trying to change the world, and sometimes it seemed as if everybody who had lived in the past fifteen years was a key. But they narrowed it down to a hundred fairly easily and then painstakingly down to ten. Finally they chose one key out of the ten, but their criteria were so ill-defined that they might just as well have chosen one of the ten at random.

It was quitting time. The streets of Washington were filled with people rushing to their homes, driven more by the fear of being caught outside when curfew fell than by the bitter October wind that sent leaves scuttling



Illustration by Ross Mathis

across the city streets. Dean Cabot was one of them, scurrying from his dishwashing job to his tiny cubbyhole of a room several blocks away from Dupont Circle. Like everyone else, he was dressed in drab colors, in blacks and dark grays and dark blues and dull browns, not like the many-colored and many-patterned shirts and blouses people had worn when he was a young man, only fifteen years earlier. But these days no one wanted to draw attention to themselves. A policeman scowled at him and he moved more briskly, past the newsstand with its headline blaring about the latest proclamation of the president-for-life. And somewhere buried inside, Dean knew, was a brief item about the resignation of the latest vice-president. There would be nothing about the rumors of strife and riots in Seattle and St. Louis.

It had been so different when he was younger, when he and Gail had been together. Then there had been hopes and dreams of a newer and better America. But all those hopes had been dashed, for Dean at least, when Gail had died in a car wreck. That's when America had turned sour, or so it had seemed to Dean.

As he walked along, his gaze downcast along with his mood, a glint of metal in the gutter caught his eye and he stopped. Looking around furtively, he scooped up the piece of metal, wondering even as he did so what had made him stop for something so insignificant; then he stepped back into the rhythm of the incessant stream of homeward-bound people.

It was only a key, but, even as he realized this, Dean's heart seemed to take a little leap in his chest. It was just like the key to the outside door of the rowhouse where he had shared a top-floor apartment with Gail fifteen years ago. A number was stamped on it: 1416. Once again Dean felt a little jolt—that had been the address of that rowhouse. Could this key belong to one of the current occupants of that house? Unlikely: there were many 1416s in Washington. But would their keys have the same shape? Some maybe, perhaps some in that same area, sharing the same landlord. Nonetheless, when he crossed the street where he and Gail had lived, Dean turned down it after an instant of thought, toward that brief nest of love and security, knowing how silly it was.

He stood before the house. Like the people of today, it too was drab, a dull brown building with nothing to distinguish it from its neighbors. Even the buildings didn't want to draw attention to themselves these days. But when Dean and Gail had lived there, the door had been a brilliant red, flowers and stained-glass hangings filled the windows, and music poured out whenever the weather was warm enough to open the windows.

Dean smoothed down his thinning hair. Even that had changed; back then he had had a stubborn cowlick that he constantly had to brush out of his eyes. Now he had a widow's peak that kept receding, and never again would he have to push hair out of his eyes.

He stood hesitantly before the door, then pressed the button for the third-floor apartment. A wave of dizziness passed over him, and he leaned against the building while he caught a breath. These waves had overcome him frequently in the past several months, and he knew

he should see a doctor, but who could afford a doctor these days? If it wasn't anything serious, then there was no sense. And if it was, then he would soon be with Gail, if only in blessed oblivion.

He looked at the crimson door in front of him and blinked. That wasn't right. It shouldn't be red now—it couldn't be. But the red door refused to go away. Dean brushed his cowlick back; there was something wrong with that, too, but he couldn't think of what. He stared at his hand, trying to remember.

The door swung open and Mr. Brannum, his landlord, who lived in the small apartment on the first floor, was standing there. "Come in, boy. Are you going to stand there all day?"

"No . . . no." Dean stepped into the tiny vestibule, still confused. From the stairwell to his left, the sounds of "Monday, Monday" drifted down from the second-floor apartment. The girls who had lived there had played it incessantly until Dean had hated the song. Now, though, whenever he heard it, it brought him back to when he and Gail had been together, with all those bittersweet memories.

"Are you all right, son?"

"Sure . . . sure. Just dizzy." He wanted to ask if Mr. Brannum still owned the building, but that was a silly question. Who was living on the third floor now?

"Well, you just go upstairs and lie down for a while. I've got to get to work now." The older man, seemingly unchanged by the passage of time, closed the door behind him. Dean wondered if Mr. Brannum still had the part-time job he had worked fifteen years ago to augment his rental income.

Slowly, fearfully, Dean mounted the stairs. There was definitely something wrong here. "Monday, Monday" grew louder. Dean looked at the key in his hand. Gisela was standing on the landing outside her apartment. She too hadn't aged a bit. She was still the gum-chewing, chubby twenty-year-old she had been . . . but that was wrong, too. There was no way she could still look the same. Dean's heart took another extra leap in his chest and he felt his muscles grow tight with fearful tension.

"Hey, Dean, what are you doin' home so soon?"

"Uh, nothing. Just a little dizzy spell."

"Maybe you been smokin' too much weed."

Dean grinned. The expression felt forced and phony. "No, I'm sure it's nothing. Just a touch of the flu."

"Gail's sure gonna be surprised to see you home this time of day."

"Gail?" *Is she alive?* Dean wanted to say, but instead he said, "Is she home?"

"You must be really mixed up. She's only got morning classes today, right?"

"Oh. Right." Dean started up the stairway to the third floor, feeling even more apprehensive and frightened. What day of the week was it? What time of year? It didn't feel like October. And exactly why was he frightened? What was he frightened of?

"See you later, Dean." Gisela went back into her apartment.

Frightened. Could these people be the same ones

from fifteen years ago, or were they really different? Who was it in that third-floor apartment? Was it really *his* Gail, or another Gail? If this was fifteen years earlier, was another Dean Cabot working in the tiny bookstore off Dupont Circle? What would happen when he got home from work? All these questions flashed through his mind while he trudged up the stairs. Dean felt dizzy again, trying to contemplate all the possibilities.

He stood before the door to the third-floor apartment, hesitant. The sound of a Beatles record drifted through the door. Finally he knocked. Familiar footsteps approached, and then Gail's voice: "Who is it?"

He felt weak. "It's me." He had to clear his throat. "Me, Dean."

"Well, some on in, for Christ's sake." The door swung open and there she was, a robe over her petite figure, her mouth in an irritated pout. "Why the hell didn't you just come on in?"

"I . . . I lost my key."

"Not again! And what are you doing home so early?"

"I felt sick. Dizzy."

The irritation left her face. She reached out to him. "Come in. Come in." She placed her hand on his forehead. "You do seem a little bit warm. I'll make you some tea and soup."

"I'm all right. I just need . . . I just need to sit down."

He walked into the front room, and it was just the way he remembered it: the ratty old couch they got with the apartment, which Gail had tried to cover with exotic Indian cloth that sold cheaply in the head shops. Her guitar was leaning against the tiny bookcases in the wall, and the worn old rug was partially covered with a small phony oriental rug they had picked up in W.T. Grant's.

He sat down on the couch, remembering a day he had come home early from work, feeling dizzy and out of sorts, pushing her aside when she had tried to be solicitous.

"You sure you don't want anything to eat?"

"I'm all right, I told you!"

She stood there, looking down at him. "Well, I'm not going to spend all afternoon playing nursemaid to you. I've got work to do."

"Then do it!"

"I've got to get that psych paper done this afternoon, and it needs a lot of polishing."

"For Christ's sake, Gail, you're aceing that course. You don't have to do anything the rest of the semester. I don't know why you had to take a Saturday morning class anyway."

The tightness was back in her mouth. "I'm going to grad school next year, and I'm going to the best damn college I can get into. I don't want to fuck that up."

It was an old argument. "What's wrong with George Washington University?"

"You can't get all your degrees from the same university. It doesn't look good. You need diversity."

"Christ, you sound like a politician. So go to American U. They've got a good poly sci program."

"I'm tired of Washington. I've spent my whole life here." She had grown up in Alexandria, the daughter of

a now-retired lifetime government employee. "I want to see the rest of this country."

"Just another year!"

"And what are *you* going to do? Spend the rest of your life working in some goddamn book store?"

"No! I just need time to figure things out."

"I thought you would come around but, Christ, you've been in this funk for half your life!"

"Two years! Christ, I came home to get a little peace and quiet, and what do I get? An argument!" He got up and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk!"

"Great! Go on! Get out of my life!"

He slammed the door behind him and stomped down the stairs. It seemed as if they were arguing all the time now. Was it his fault that he had no ambition? He had been sailing along with a high B in nuclear engineering when the draft lottery had been held and he had come up with number three-sixty-five. Since he had been in school primarily to escape the draft, he dropped out. A year later he had met Gail and they had hit it off. But now she wanted to go to grad school and leave him behind.

He stepped out into the street. It wasn't October; it felt like early summer. Why did he think it was October? Of course it was summer; it was June. And why had he left Gail alone in the apartment? Something terrible could happen to her. But what? It seemed as if he knew, but it stayed there at the edge of his mind. To hell with her. He started walking toward Dupont Circle.

Why couldn't she understand? It made no sense to go back to school if you didn't want to. That was just a waste of time and money. But he loved her so. The thought of losing her hurt so bad, as if someone were mangling his body, pressing the life out of him with unyielding metal. He had never felt this way before, so lost, so alone, so destitute, as if he had already lived the rest of his lifetime without her.

The newsman alongside the People's Drugstore at the corner of P and 20th caught his eye. He realized that it wasn't the man who usually sold papers there, but an older man with a long white beard. The man looked at him intensely as he held up the latest issue of the *Washington Post*. The headlines were about the SALT treaty and a Russian visit to Hanoi, and there was a picture of the President embracing the Mexican president. Something about the newspaper disturbed Dean. He moved closer to see the date: June 17, 1972. But that was the day that . . . Impossible memories flooded into his mind.

"Why don't you take a paper home to your lady, son?" the old man said, but before he finished he was speaking to no one; Dean had turned and started racing back toward his apartment.

She was already at the second-floor landing when he got home, her suitcases in her hands.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Home. I'll spend the rest of the semester living with my mother."

"Don't go yet," he said desperately. "One more day! Please, that's all I ask."

"I've given you enough chances already, Dean. Get out of my way." She started down the stairway, but Dean refused to move, blocking her exit. "Get out of my way!" she repeated.

"I won't let you go," he insisted. "It's dangerous out there."

"Don't bend me any of that male bullshit. Honestly, Dean! I thought you were above *that*!"

"That's not what I mean."

She tried to push her way past him, and suddenly they were a twisted mass of arms and legs and suitcases crumpled in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. "Damn you, Dean!"

"Are you all right?"

"I think I've twisted my ankle."

"Let's see." She got up and limped around the foyer a couple of times. "Well, that's that," he said. "You certainly can't drive with your ankle in that shape."

"Yes, I can."

"Be sensible, Gail. You've got to go upstairs and put an ice pack on it. Then, if it doesn't swell, I'll let you go home if you want. But if you don't do something immediately . . ."

"Damn you, Dean!" She started limping up the staircase. "Bring my suitcases back up, will you?"

"Sure." He couldn't keep from grinning broadly.

"And wipe that shit-eating grin off your face. As soon as I'm sure this thing is okay, I'm leaving."

"Okay. I won't stop you then."

She stopped, looking back at him with a puzzled expression on her face. "Do you *want* me to leave?"

"No. But keeping you here against your will isn't going to do me any good, is it?" She shook her head, more in exasperation than in agreement, and started back up the stairway. "But I warn you, Gail, I'll follow you wherever you go."

"Fine. As long as you're going to school at the same time."

"Maybe I will." He deposited the suitcases in the living room while Gail went into the kitchen to get some ice. "I'll go out and get some Chinese food, okay? We can talk about it over dinner."

"I'm leaving, Dean."

"Sure. Right after dinner."

He raced down the stairs and to the oriental restaurant around the corner, where he ordered beef and snow peas to go. While they were getting it ready, he

went to the liquor store next door and bought a bottle of Lancer's. Then he hurried back to the apartment, noting with relief that her car was still there. But when he reached the door and was fumbling for his key, he was struck by another wave of dizziness. He stood there, the key in his hand, feeling suddenly chilly, when the door opened.

"You found it?" a man with a white beard said. "Thank you." He held out his hand and, without thinking, Dean put the key in it. What had happened to the oriental dinner and the wine? And why did he have a jacket on in June?

"Don't you think you'd better go home to your wife?" the man said.

"My wife." Dean turned and started down the stairs.

"Thank you, Dean," the man said. Dean turned, but the door was already closing on that white-bearded face.

He started walking toward the Metro, then stopped. Metro? There had been no subway when he and Gail had lived together . . . or in that other world that now seemed like a dream, a world where the president had barricaded himself in the White House for fifteen years, a world where the United States was deeply divided, fragmenting more and more with each passing year. *This* world . . . Dean inhaled the October air deeply, as disconnected memories flooded his mind. The people didn't seem any happier, but they didn't seem as harried, as frightened. There was a businessman with a vividly colored tie, a young man with long hair, a brightly painted bus. No, this may not be the best of all possible worlds, but it was a damn sight better than the one Dean had left . . . how long ago? Minutes? Seconds? Fifteen years?

But why? What had happened? Gail must be the clue, the key to it all. Because in this world she was alive, waiting for him with their two young children. In this world she had gotten her doctorate and was now an advisor for a political science think-tank in Washington. And Dean? Well, he had settled for a bachelor's in engineering and was doing well. But he wasn't the key; it was Gail. Somehow the fact of her existence had changed the world.

It had to be her; the guy who had been driving the other car had been just a night watchman in some apartment complex called Watgate. ♦



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The Seventies: Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll

Mike Ashley

The title of Ian Dury's record "Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll" often comes to mind when I think of science fiction from the early 1970s, especially when I think of *Amazing Stories*.

Let me explain, starting with the rock and roll . . . but first, some background.

Ted White, the new editor of *Amazing Stories* and its sister title *Fantastic*, took up his duties in October 1968. Unlike his immediate predecessors, Barry Malzberg and Harry Harrison, White was at heart a science-fiction fan: he had just won the 1968 Hugo Award as Best Fan Writer. One would have to go back to Raymond Palmer in the 1940s to find another editor of the magazine who was rooted in sf fandom. White had been born in February 1938, a few months before Palmer took the helm of *Amazing*, and had grown up on a diet of Palmer's later magazine *Other Worlds*. It was Palmer's style of editing that most influenced White's own. For the first time in almost thirty years, *Amazing* had the chance to develop a character.

White had already gained some editing experience before taking over at *Amazing*. From 1963 to 1968 he had worked as assistant editor (later associate editor) of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, initially under Avram Davidson and then under Edward Ferman. He had also served a term as associate editor at Lancer Books, under Larry Shaw. In 1966 he tried to launch his own magazine, called *Stellar*, but the fi-

nancial burden proved too heavy. Some of the stories he had selected for that abortive magazine now had a chance to surface in *Amazing* and *Fantastic*.

In addition, White was a writer. He wrote for several music magazines and had a particular passion for jazz and rock music (we're getting to the rock-and-roll connection, but not quite yet). He also wrote science fiction, mostly of the fantastic adventure kind. Novels such as *Phoenix Prime* (1966) and its sequel *The Sorceress of Qar* (1968) betray a variety of pulp influences, not least those of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Robert E. Howard. But White's style was also molded by the techniques emerging from the New Wave of the 1960s. White's tastes were not restricted to either school of science fiction. He liked the best of both.

In his first editorial for *Amazing Stories*, in the May 1969 issue, he likened the development of the New Wave in science fiction to the 1960s revolution in rock music (*now* we're there), and the emergence of heavy metal and acid rock. White pointed out that this music was able to coexist beside the more melodic rhythms of the Beach Boys and other styles of music. It was also important to recognize that heavy rock was draw-

ing upon its roots, in rhythm and blues, to express its new voice.

He saw no reason why science fiction should not follow the same pattern. Not only could all forms of science fiction exist side by side—the traditional alongside the modern—but the modern had itself developed from science fiction's roots. By publishing both forms of sf in *Amazing*, White could make it possible for the old and the new to influence each other.

As examples of this policy, White emphasized two new stories. The first was the latest Star Kings novella by Edmond Hamilton, "The Horror from the Magellanic." This series, wherein the mind of twentieth-century John Gordon swaps bodies with a man from two hundred millennia in the future, was highly derivative of Burroughs's Martian novels. The first of the series, "The Star Kings," had appeared in *Amazing* back in September 1947, and while Hamilton was now writing better than ever, the story and plot line were pure unadulterated pulp adventure.

The second example started in the following issue (July 1969). Robert Silverberg's new serial, "Up the Line," was a lighthearted but ingenious time-travel adventure, in which a Time Courier changes the

The Amazing Story Part 6

past and finds himself on the run from the Time Police. Looking back now from the vantage point of more than twenty years in the future, the story seems fairly mundane, but at the time it was a fresh treatment of an old theme. It proved very popular and was the runner-up to Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* for the 1970 Best Novel Hugo Award, overcoming such competition as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Piers Anthony's *Macroscopic*, and Norman Spinrad's trend-setting *Bug Jack Barron*.

Although the Swinging Sixties were almost gone and flower power was fading fast, the influence of psychedelia had left its mark on Ted White, and this influence now infiltrated *Amazing Stories*. But White first had to overcome the legacy of the last few years.

When Sol Cohen purchased the magazines in 1965, he instigated a reprint policy, taking advantage of the fact that *Amazing's* previous publishers had bought second serial rights to the stories. Cohen could thus fill the magazines with reprints and make no further payments to the authors, saving around \$8,000 a year minimum. His editors, though, had insisted that each issue contain at least one or two new stories. The best of these original works were serials. The stories were often short and, as time went on, seldom significant.

Ted White sought to change that. With the November 1969 *Amazing* he was able to proclaim that thereafter issues would contain only one reprint, and that as a bonus to an otherwise full issue of new stories. The use of a smaller typeface meant that the magazine contained at least 70,000 words of new material, the equivalent of any other sf magazine.

Cohen had siphoned the reprints into a number of all-reprint magazines. He had already established *Great Science Fiction*, *The Most Thrilling Science Fiction Ever Told* (now retitled *Thrilling SF Adventures*), and *Science Fiction Classics*. These were now supplemented by *Space Adventures*, *Strange Fantasy*, *Science Fantasy*, and others, all of which drew indiscriminately upon the best and worst fiction from *Amazing*, *Fantas-*

tic, and *Fantastic Adventures*, without payment to the writers. Even though the separateness of the reprint magazines from *Amazing* and *Fantastic* allowed White to develop new fiction in those two titles, the cheap production and content of the reprint magazines gave science-fiction magazines a poor image. Most of these titles were short-lived, although *Science Fiction Adventures* lasted until 1974, when it was absorbed into *Thrilling Science Fiction*, which survived for two more issues.

White still had to use one reprint issue in *Amazing*, until he could do away with them altogether beginning with the March 1972 issue. For the immediate future, White was also forced to use cover paintings purchased cheaply from European magazines, but he made the best of this situation by commissioning authors to write stories around them. The first was Greg Benford's "Sons of Man" in the November 1969 issue. Set at the end of the 1990s, the story links the discovery of a wrecked spacecraft on the Moon with the fabled Bigfoot. Benford was still a relatively new writer with his reputation yet to be made, and this story is far from his best, though the ending is poignant. The same issue saw the start of Benford's series of scientific articles under the general title of "The Science in Science Fiction," written with fellow physicist David Book.

Of some significance in the November 1969 *Amazing* was the start of Philip K. Dick's new serial, "A. Lincoln, Simulacrum," better known by its book title, *We Can Build You*. This isn't one of Dick's most notable novels, but it is a key one in the understanding of his fears about the future. Its significance is related more to the type of reader Dick was likely to attract to the magazine. At this time Dick was establishing his following among the drug culture, many of whose members had been attracted by his enigmatic classic, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. While White was not going out of his way to pander to the growing drug culture, he did seem to have a close affinity with it. This was evident from an article, "Science Fiction and Drugs," which White wrote pseudonymously

in the June 1970 *Fantastic*. He believed we were entering the "psychedelic seventies," in which alcohol would be out and drugs would be in. White didn't overtly promote the free use of drugs in this article, but he did clearly favor drugs over alcohol, and suggested that science fiction needed to consider how the possible legalization of some drugs might affect the future.

White was open to a greater liberalization of science fiction, in line with what was happening to youth nationwide. He saw science fiction as a vehicle to push back the barriers of the "establishment" with no suppression of soft drugs, "healthy sex," or free expression. Both *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic* were becoming closer to "hippie" sf magazines than anything else in science fiction.

In hindsight, there may be some relationship between that fact and the work of Ursula K. Le Guin at this time. Her straightforward drug-image story, "The Good Trip," appeared in *Fantastic* (August 1970), and *Amazing* serialized her novel of dream-worlds, "The Lathe of Heaven" (March and May 1971). This book, about a patient whose dreams can alter reality, reads like a tribute to Philip K. Dick, which is further emphasis of the development of *Amazing* into a magazine where the fiction challenged the very fabric of this world and beyond. The novel was both a Nebula and a Hugo Award nominee.

White strove to attract good fiction and new writers to the magazines. *Amazing* had been in a wilderness for the last five years, and White was having a hard time attracting writers. Because he was paying the lowest rates in the field, he knew he wouldn't have first shot at the best fiction around, but he might have a chance at some of the best experimental fiction, which had no ready market elsewhere, and thereby attract those writers who didn't otherwise click with the establishment. One such writer was Piers Anthony.

Today, Anthony's name is closely associated with his humorous, pun-ridden fantasies set in the Oz-like world of Xanth, and he is regarded by some (unfairly) as a hack. Twenty

years ago, Anthony was emerging as one of the more original and challenging writers of science fiction, especially with his novels *Cthlon* and *Macroscopic*. At this early stage in his career he was having problems finding a regular market for his material. Typical was the plight of his novel *Hasan*, a fantasy modeled on an episode in *The Arabian Nights*, which had received a dozen rejections from publishers. Anthony became more entrepreneurial and had the manuscript reviewed in the amateur magazine *Science Fiction Review*. Here it came to the attention of Ted White, who asked to see it and within three weeks had bought it for *Fantastic* (it was serialized in the December 1969 and February 1970 issues). This original way to both sell and acquire material shows how White's proximity to fandom had its advantages.

Pleased with the reception of *Hasan*, Anthony offered White his next novel, *Orm*. This was the sequel to *Omnivore*, but Anthony had been having problems with his publisher over the novel. It was serialized in the July and September 1970 issues of *Amazing*. These two novels coming out so close together brought attention to the diversity of Anthony's work and the detail in his research and story development. I like to think they helped boost Anthony's reputation, which was struggling to establish itself in the book market. I can certainly attest to my own feelings at that time; it was the reading of these two novels that clinched Anthony in my mind as a writer of note. I suspect these sales also boosted Anthony's confidence in trying times. He has gone on record as regarding White as "an excellent editor."

Other writers who refused to be categorized but who seemed at home in Ted White's world began to appear, among them Richard A. Lupoff, Barry N. Malzberg, David R. Bunch, R. A. Lafferty, Alexei Panshin, Christopher Priest, James Tiptree, Jr., Avram Davidson, and Philip José Farmer. All offered their offbeat style of story, which had a chance to mature since the experimental days of the mid-1960s when Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds* led the revolution in speculative fiction. Not

only were these stories more acceptable to the reader by the early 1970s, but the writers had come to grips with what they were trying to do. The result was a more polished and sophisticated treatment.

No other editor gave writers this kind of opportunity on such a scale. The next closest was Ejler Jakobsson at *Galaxy* and *If*, and since those titles retained their formidable reputations from their former editors Fredrik Pohl and Horace Gold, and were able to pay better word rates, they are often regarded as the leading experimental titles of the 1970s. But Jakobsson was not as proactive as White, nor did he have the same passion for the field. Neither *Galaxy* nor *If*, for my money, was able to generate the energy that was sparking from *Amazing* and *Fantastic* or the feeling that it was in their pages that things were happening.

There is a simple but original example of this fact. In the April 1970 *Fantastic*, Hank Stine wrote perceptive reviews of *The Prisoner* television series and of the two novelizations from Ace Books, *The Prisoner* by Thomas Disch and *Number Two* by David McDaniel. He considered the merits of leading writers adding other books to the series. Terry Carr, the editor at Ace, noted Stine's views and commissioned him to do a third book in the series, *A Day in the Life*. It was that kind of event that made one feel *Amazing* and *Fantastic* were making things happen.

The same April 1970 *Fantastic* was significant for another reason: It carried the first new cover that White was able to commission, doing away with the European reprints. The May *Amazing* followed suit. Thereafter White was able to publish some striking covers by some of the field's most exciting artists: Jeff Jones, Mike Kaluta, John Pederson, Jr., Joe Staton, Doug Chaffee, Vaughn Bodé, Dan Adkins, and most significantly Mike Hinge. Hinge's covers were bold, brash, experimental, and colorful. They were called the science-fiction field's first psychedelic covers, and they helped confirm the image *Amazing* was building. Ironically, Hinge's style had not been adapted for the 1970s. He had submitted some

of these covers to *Amazing* in the early 1960s, but the art editor had rejected them. Now, ten years later, they were finding their home at last. Hinge's work was noted and appreciated. In 1973 he was nominated for the Hugo as Best Artist, losing out to Kelly Freas.

White's credo had been to publish the best of the new alongside the best of the traditional. The emphasis was clearly on the new, and this was in part reflected by the change in the magazine's full name from *Amazing Stories* to *Amazing Science Fiction Stories* (in September 1970) and then to *Amazing Science Fiction* (in March 1972). There was also a restyling of the cover logo, giving a sharper, more contemporary 1970s image.

While White was publishing experimental work from more challenging writers, he was also nurturing new talent and welcoming back to the fold some of the older writers.

One of the first newcomers was Gordon Eklund. He appeared with "Dear Aunt Annie" in that all-important April 1970 *Fantastic*, and that story went on to be nominated for a Nebula Award as one of the year's best novelettes. Eklund became one of the best new writers of the 1970s, his stories frequently presenting a fresh face on old themes. White was able to publish some of Eklund's most thought-provoking works, including "Beyond the Resurrection" (*Fantastic*, April and June 1972), "The Ascending Aye" (*Amazing*, January 1973), "Moby, Too" (*Amazing*, December 1973), and "Locust Descending" (*Fantastic*, February 1976).

Other new writers whom White developed and encouraged included Gerard F. Conway, Grant Carrington, George Alec Effinger, F. M. Busby (who sold his first story in 1957, then waited fifteen years before selling his second one to White), Dennis O'Neil, Rich Brown, Janet Fox, Thomas Monteleone, and John Shirley. Not too surprisingly, most of these names first appeared in *Fantastic*, since that magazine allowed for a broader range of fiction with a greater opportunity to experiment. Shirley's work, though, to a large extent typified what was appearing in *Amazing*.

His "What He Wanted (*Amazing*, November 1975) contains it all—sex, drugs, religion, violence, uncensored language, and rock and roll.

White also published new work by some of the old-timers in the field, such as Raymond Z. Gallun and Ross Rocklynne, as well as some not seen for years, such as Wilmar Shiras, Gardner F. Fox, and Noel Loomis. Alongside these he used some of the best work by leading writers: Bob Shaw, John Brunner, Brian Aldiss, Fritz Leiber, L. Sprague de Camp, Poul Anderson, Robert Silverberg, William F. Nolan, and Jack Vance.

The strength of both *Amazing* and *Fantastic* was in their powerful lead novels supported by a genuine variety of exciting stories.

Fantastic was in the forefront of the growth of interest in fantasy fiction, and though it never seemed to benefit from this event directly in terms of increased circulation, the magazine was highly influential as a vehicle for developing fantasy. It published, for instance, a rare sword-and-sorcery novella by Dean R. Koontz, "The Crimson Witch" (October 1970), in what should now be a highly collectible issue; it used a new Elric story by Michael Moorcock, "The Sleeping Sorceress" (February 1972); and it printed one of the finest yet most overlooked fantasy novels of the 1970s, "The Son of Black Morca" by Alexei and Cory Panshin (April, July, and September 1973, published in book form as *Earth Magic*). It also ran several new Conan stories by L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter.

Amazing was typified by its novels stressing the psychological anguish of the near future, works such as Silverberg's "The Second Trip" (July and September 1971), about the effects of rehabilitating personalities; Shaw's slow-glass serial "Other Days, Other Eyes" (May and July 1972); and Brunner's savage future in "The Stone That Never Came Down" (October and December 1973), which considers the effects of a drug that enhances intelligence.

Although there were also more traditional stories in *Amazing*, on balance the majority emphasized the social and cultural aspects of the future rather than the scientific. They

also showed a tendency toward emphasizing sex in all its forms (you were probably wondering when I would get to that part of the title). White didn't deliberately buy sex stories for effect, though some writers may have produced work with that intent, but there was no doubt that as the 1970s progressed, and as the barriers around the free use of sex in science fiction came down, so the topic began to dominate stories, and those in *Amazing* perhaps more than those in other magazines.

There are a few that stand out. White got the ball rolling (if you'll excuse the expression) with some of his own stories, which had been rejected from Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions* anthology. "Growing Up Fast in the City" (May 1971) looked at the lives of students in the near future, and involved some scenes of loose sex. By today's standards these scenes were mild, but they brought a hostile response from some readers, who regarded the story as pornographic. It was nothing compared to what lay in the future. Other offerings included several short stories by Barry Malzberg that seem to have no motive in mind other than to shock. "On Ice" (January 1973) involves a drug-induced frenzy leading to a climax of buggery and possession, while "Upping the Planet" (April 1974) concerns a man having to masturbate twenty-four times in twenty-four hours in order to save the planet from alien invasion.

But the most controversial of all was "Two of a Kind" by Rich Brown (March 1977). Set in an anarchic future where government agents hunt down blacks for meat and sport, the story is taken up in great part by the graphic rape of a black woman and the slaughter of her rapists. Apart from the futuristic setting and some of the sf trappings—laser guns and field suits—this story could easily be set in the modern day, and reads like an excuse for sex and violence.

Controversy aside—though it was never far away in White's magazines—White published much that was respectable science fiction and fantasy. For instance, "Junction" by Jack Dann (*Fantastic*, November 1973), about a small midwestern

town separated from causality and surrounded by chaos. Or "The Climetron" (*Amazing*, May 1975; reprinted in August 1991), one of George Zebrowski's ingenious stories about a history machine. Or "His Hour Upon the Stage" (*Amazing*, March 1976), a telling story about the last live actors by Grant Carrington. Or "Tin Woodman" (*Amazing*, December 1976), a delightful first-contact story by Dennis Bailey and Dave Bischoff. These last two mentioned stories were finalists for the Nebula Award.

Like them or loathe them, you could never ignore the stories in *Amazing*, and they made every issue an event. And let me not mislead you. I've concentrated on the fiction, but White also did much to make the nonfiction departments in both magazines lively and informative. Right from the start he had reinstated "The Club House," reviewing fan publications, run by John D. Berry initially and later by Susan Wood. There was a long and lively letters section, and a wide range of perceptive book reviews. White's editorials were always fascinating, if at times self-indulgent. And there were always interesting articles on subjects relevant to sf, such as Greg Benford's series of articles and Darrell Schweitzer's author interviews.

White's success was not ignored by the fans. *Amazing* was nominated three times for the Hugo Award for Best Professional Magazine (1970, 1971, and 1972), each time coming in third behind *F&SF* and *Analog*. When that category was discontinued in favor of Best Professional Editor, White was nominated every year from 1973 through 1977, though he never finished higher than third.

But this recognition was not reflected in sales. Despite all he did to make *Amazing* and *Fantastic* the most exciting magazines of the 1970s, circulation continued to dwindle. *Amazing's* sales had been around the 38,000 mark when White took over in 1968. It dropped a thousand or two per year, so that by 1978 it was down to 22,000. White grew increasingly more frustrated with this trend. Early in his editorial reign he had argued that he was seeking to

make *Amazing* the best magazine on the market, and only if that achievement led to no increase in circulation would he concede that he had failed.

But is a rise or fall in circulation necessarily related to quality? We have already seen how *Amazing's* circulation rose rapidly in the 1940s in response to the Shaver Mystery, so that when quality was at its lowest ebb, circulation was at its highest. When *Amazing* redeemed itself under Cele Goldsmith in the early 1960s circulation continued to fall, yet when Sol Cohen purchased it and instigated his reprint policy, circulation initially rose. Now, when White had made *Amazing* arguably one of the most important science-fiction magazines, circulation was dropping.

Clearly it was not White's failure. Other science-fiction magazines were similarly suffering. *If* had folded in 1974, and *Galaxy* would barely survive the decade. Other seemingly strong new titles, among them *Cosmos* and *Vertex*, came and went. Who or what was to blame?

It is easy to blame the distributor. Over the years, weak distribution has caused the death of scores of magazines. *Amazing* was selling only a third of the copies it printed. Two-thirds, therefore, either were languishing in the distributor's warehouse or remaining boxed and unopened at the newsstand. Crazy though this may seem, it was probably more profitable for the distributor and dealer to act this way, since they were guaranteed money on returns. *Amazing* suffered from not being big enough (like *Playboy* or *Time*) to make wholesale distribution profitable or small enough (like some of the emerging small-press magazines, such as *Whispers*) to survive solely by subscription.

There was another factor to consider: the changing shape of the science-fiction market. Magazines had been in decline since the 1950s, under threats from television, comic books, and paperbacks. Those threats had not gone away by the 1970s. However, although television had eaten into reading time (and may have totally taken away the desire to read in some people), it was not a substitute for reading. Comic books attracted the more junior element of

the magazine readership, one to which *Amazing* was no longer trying to appeal. So the most direct threat was from the paperback book.

The most popular paperback books were novels, and one way that magazines fought against this phenomenon was by advance serialization of novels. But with paperback novels now proliferating, this feature of magazines was becoming less of a lure to readers.

The magazine's main territory was the short story. Book publishers have always maintained that short-story collections do not sell as well as novels, yet that has not stopped their regular publication. Science-fiction anthologies have frequently sold well, but until the 1960s they contained mostly stories reprinted from magazines. Magazines retained the strength of being the place where new short stories could be seen. Then, that bastion was eroded away during the 1970s. The previous decade had seen the birth of a number of regular paperback anthologies, with *New Writings in SF* and *Orbit* leading the way. The 1970s brought a proliferation of these series: *Nova*, *New Dimensions*, *Universe*, *Quark*, *Infinity*, plus a mass of original anthologies edited by Roger Elwood. By the mid-1970s the short-story market was saturated. The magazines, always playing second fiddle to the paperbacks, were bound to suffer.

Ironically, against this background came a successful new magazine. *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, under the editorship of George Scithers (who steps into *Amazing's* history in next month's article), was issued in January 1977. Its circulation immediately exceeded 100,000, four times that of *Amazing* and more than that of *Analog*, the former leader in the field.

Of course, the new magazine had the selling power of Asimov's name, but it had more than that. Its publisher, Joel Davis, believed in digest fiction magazines and was solidly behind their promotion. He was able to market *Asimov's* alongside the best-selling *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and the new periodical clearly benefited from a combined distribution package. The irony here is that

Joel Davis is the son of Bernard Davis, the co-publisher of *Amazing* during its Ziff-Davis days. Bernard Davis had left that firm in 1957 when it started to move away from fiction magazines. If he had taken *Amazing* with him, the magazine's fate may have been oh so different.

All these factors were affecting Ted White. He was becoming tired. His editorial work had always been a part-time job, yet it was growing increasingly more time-consuming as he took on further responsibilities not just in editing but in art design and packaging. The demands of his expanding role were dominating and sapping his writing energies. He occasionally vented his views in his editorials, and in so doing sometimes clashed with his publisher. Although Sol Cohen was the active partner in the Ultimate Publishing Company, the financing for the magazine came from Arthur Bernhard, who did not always like the political views expressed by White. More than once, White had to pull an editorial that had been vetoed by Bernhard.

Money was always tight. White introduced a controversial new policy whereby unsolicited submissions from writers with no previous sales had to be accompanied by a twenty-five-cent reading fee, which went to *Amazing's* first readers, Grant Carrington and Rick Snead. While many people recognized the value in such a tactic, it was overall an unpopular move, since it was effectively aimed against the very writers White was seeking to encourage. It was a sign of desperation.

Several times Cohen sought a new publisher for the magazine, but Bernhard vetoed any sale. White became increasingly fatigued, and considered resigning in 1975. Then came a change in the publishing schedule. Cohen was especially concerned when a price increase from 75¢ to \$1.00 (November 1975) caused sales to drop alarmingly. He decided to let issues stay on sale a month longer in hopes of recouping the lost market, and so both *Amazing* and *Fantastic* went to a quarterly schedule. This allowed White more time to edit each issue, so he stayed on. However, this change also made it impractical

to run serials. As a consequence, another of *Amazing's* weapons against the paperback was lost.

Sales continued to drop. In September 1978, Cohen called it a day. He was sixty-eight, and he was also tired. He sold his stock to Bernhard, who took over full control of the magazines. White agreed to stay on during the transition, but six weeks later he resigned. By then it had become clear that Bernhard did not intend to invest any new money in the magazines. The stories in the inventory had not been paid for, and White returned them to their authors, suggesting they may choose to re-submit them to the new publisher.

White had had enough. He had remained true to the spirit of the magazines throughout his ten years as editor, second only to Palmer in duration. (In fact, his period exceeds Palmer's if you exclude Palmer's final two years, when William Hamling was really editing the magazine.) The final issues lacked some of the verve of White's early years, not surprising considering the pressures he was facing. Against the most appalling odds, White had achieved the impossible. He had rescued *Amazing* from its fate in 1968, had given it a respectability and reputation that was enviable, and had furthered the evolution of science fiction during one of the genre's most volatile decades. It was probably the right time to move on. (White eventually became editor of the fantasy graphic magazine *Heavy Metal*, and thereafter developed his own music label. We end where we began, with the power of music.) But the magazine needed a good editor to take up the reins.

I was horrified when I saw the May 1979 *Amazing*, the first under Bernhard's new regime. Because of a lack of new material, the issue was mostly reprints. The production was awful. It looked cheap and uninspiring. That horrible feeling of *déjà vu* swept over me. I rushed off a letter to the new editor, someone called Omar Gohagen, saying, more or less, "My God. What have you done?"

Just what they had done, and how *Amazing* survived to this day, we'll explore in the final installment of this series next month. ♦

Mike Ashley

About the Authors

Harry Turtledove makes his first appearance in the full-sized version of *AMAZING*® Stories with a touching tale of "The Last Reunion"—a story that springs from research he did for his upcoming alternate-history Civil War novel, *The Guns of the South*, which is due out in October.

A historian by training, Harry has an appreciation for factual accuracy. He points out that the protagonist of this story really did serve in the 47th North Carolina; the description of the Battle of Reams Station comes partly from that character's regimental history; and there really was a reunion of Confederate veterans in Richmond in 1932. "The Last Reunion" certainly fits the requirement of being a story that *could* happen—because some of its events actually *did*.

Another established writer making his debut in the full-sized magazine is **Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.** "Little Brother's Turn to Watch" is his fifth contribution to *AMAZING* Stories, but only his second appearance in the last six years (following "The Original Magic," September 1990). His most recent novel, *Fire on the Border*, was reviewed in our May 1991 issue.

The accomplishments and credentials of **Arlan Andrews, Sr.** would fill this "About the Authors" space all by themselves. In order to keep the other authors from getting irritated at us, we'll briefly say that he's currently serving a one-year appointment as a White House fellow of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, studying—among other things—the application of nanotechnology. "The Eggs in the Streets" is his fourth piece of prose fiction for this magazine; his next most recent, "Renaissance Manna," was in January 1991.

Ben Bova ended a protracted absence from these pages with "The Long Fall" in our December 1991 issue. A much longer journey is described in his upcoming novel *Mars*—the opening pages of which are presented here under the title "The Red World and the Blue." When

people from this blue world finally travel to that red one, it might happen just this way.

Last issue we talked about "Against the Night"; now, along with the last installment of this two-parter, here's a little about **V. E. Mitchell**. By the time you read this, Vicki's second novel, *Imbalance* (a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* book) should be out. Her first novel, *Enemy Unseen* (a *Star Trek* novel), was a *New York Times* bestseller. Her real-world occupation is that of a geologist—which, we suppose, is about as real-world as a job can be.

By a pleasant coincidence, **Grant Carrington** shows up in two different places in this magazine. "The Key" is his first short story for us in exactly ten years, and prior to that 1982 appearance he was a fairly frequent contributor to these pages in the early and mid-1970s. Grant's other connection with this magazine is described by Mike Ashley in Part 6 of "The Amazing Story" . . . on the page directly opposite this one.

Speaking of **Mike Ashley**, it's about time we gave our resident historian some space in this column. He's one of the few acknowledged experts on the history of science-fiction magazines, and what you've seen in "The Amazing Story" represents only the tip of the iceberg as far as his knowledge of the field is concerned. The most recent of his thirty books is *The Gernsback Days*. (If you've been following his series, you don't need to be told who Gernsback is.)

And, if you've been following what's popular in science fiction and fantasy, you already know who **Anne McCaffrey** and **Mercedes Lackey** are. Which is just as well, because we're just about to run out of space. "The Ship Who Searched" is this magazine's first serialization of a novel in a *long time*—and because it is a serial, we have three more chances to give you some biographical notes about Anne and Misty. ♦

Book Reviews



PHOENIX FIRE

by Elizabeth Forrest
DAW Books, March 1992
364 pages, \$4.99 (paperback)

Elizabeth Forrest's *Phoenix Fire* has an odd problem for a fantasy: its plot suffers from an excess of plausibility. But her premise is distinctive and her characters are sympathetic, making the novel a likable low-key tale in which an ancient supernatural conflict unexpectedly erupts into the present day.

The adversaries are a demon of unspecified origin and the phoenix of classic mythology, both long out of circulation when the novel opens. But a Chinese archaeological excavation accidentally releases the demon, while in southern California, the phoenix is rising to the surface of the LaBrea tar pits. Not surprisingly, the demon's first instinct (aside from wreaking general havoc) is to search out and destroy its old enemy.

But the hunt really isn't the novel's focus. Forrest instead gives center stage to three Californians drawn by chance into the web of events. There's Susan, a young, widowed fashion designer whose business partner is taking advantage of her good will. There's one-time financier Elmore Carter, who's using his recently implanted pacemaker as a crutch. And there's Susan's elderly father-in-law, whose dreams combine memories of German prison camps with fiery feathered shadows that loom over the present. Forrest draws this

accidental trio with compassionate intimacy, giving each one a remarkably convincing balance of self-confidence and self-doubt. The book is as much about their personal crises as it is about a magical confrontation.

That's both a strength and a weakness. Forrest's characterization is first-rate, but it generates a whole set of subplots that don't connect to the evolving magical crisis until nearly the end of the book. From her cast's viewpoint, that's perfectly logical—but from the reader's perspective, it gives the novel an odd, off-balance quality that makes it hard to tell which threads are subplots and which are part of the main story.

Despite the somewhat rambling nature of the narrative, *Phoenix Fire* is an appealing book with a voice that is unequivocally its own, different even from the current class of "urban faerie" that's its closest literary cousin. That's a considerable virtue, and one that thoughtful readers are likely to appreciate. — J. Bunnell

MURASAKI

edited by Robert Silverberg
Bantam Spectra, April 1992
290 pages, \$20 (hardcover)

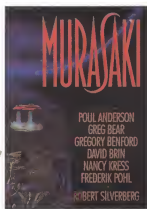
The initial challenge of *Murasaki* is to decide exactly what sort of book it's supposed to be. The jacket calls it "a novel in six parts," but Robert Silverberg's introduction opens by referring to it as "an anthology of new stories" and goes on to discuss the nature of shared-world collections

at some length. This is no ordinary shared world, however; only winners of the Nebula Award were invited to participate, and where a majority of shared worlds are fantasy realms, *Murasaki* is hard SF with a vengeance and sixty pages of carefully extrapolated design notes to prove its point.

Those design notes, unfortunately, are the key to the book. The inclusion of Poul Anderson's and Frederik Pohl's detailed background essays on the dual-planetary *Murasaki* system renders the volume an exercise in speculative worldbuilding —with "exercise" as the crucial term. Readers will inevitably compare the initial outline to the finished stories, focusing more attention on the creative process than on its results. The alternative is to ignore the essays entirely, but that makes twenty percent of the book superfluous, which in turn limits the prospective reader's enthusiasm for its \$20 price tag.

The second consequence of the emphasis on source material is that *Murasaki* is not merely unusual, it's too much so. Pohl and Anderson postulate no less than three sentient species, build a spectacularly complex set of interlocking ecosystems, and then toss explorers from Earth willy-nilly into the equation. There are simply too many ideas here, and adding the element of multiple authorship to the project only further confuses what is already an overly cluttered scenario.

Readers who can sort out the tan-



gle of concepts and characters should find the stories to be at least readable; the Nebula cachet at least assures a consistent level of craftsmanship throughout. Of the six contributors, Anderson and Nancy Kress provide the strongest tales—Anderson's offers a narrow, sharply realized confrontation between two researchers, and Kress gives the cycle a suitably dramatic finish. Pohl's opening story is intriguing, but sets up the strangest and most discordant plot-backlash in the book. Other contributors include Gregory Benford, Greg Bear, and David Brin, each with work that's passable without being distinctive.

Murasaki is billed as a major feat of world-building, and readers who like their SF diamond-hard and full of logical justification ought to find it instructive on that level. But it's a far better book about world-building than it is a work of fiction, and readers seeking anything less than a college-level seminar series are advised to steer well clear. — *J. Bunnell*

ALTERNATE PRESIDENTS

edited by Mike Resnick
Tor Books, February 1992
466 pages, \$4.99 (paperback)

This has to be the thickest anthology I've ever seen outside a best-of-the-year collection, which is a recommendation in itself. But the real reason to buy *Alternate Presidents* is that it's a fascinating history of elections that went to someone else—

with more than a few stories that will likely show up in best-of-the-year collections down the line.

Mike Resnick might be forgiven a bit of editorial enthusiasm for referring to "a pair of brilliant novelettes" in his introduction. In this case, though, Resnick isn't exaggerating. "Suppose They Gave a Peace . . ." finds Susan Shwartz in top form with a rare breed of Vietnam-era story in which political ideology is both integral and irrelevant, while Pat Cadigan's "Dispatches from the Revolution" takes off from the 1968 Democratic Convention with as apt a chronicle of the countercultural experience as one could want.

The stories are arranged by election years, stretching from 1789 to 1988. Resnick opens and closes the book on a light note, but while Robert Sheckley sends a newly elected Michael Dukakis on a purely absurd underground subway tour of the USA, Jody Lynn Nye's tale of a Presidential Ben Franklin has a touch of biting sophistication that makes it Nye's best work to date.

Between those two tales is a diverse gathering of speculation that includes war stories, political intrigues, matters of diplomacy, and moments of personal crisis. There's scarcely a misfire in the lot, with only Barry Malzberg's "Kingfish," involving Huey Long and Hitler, not quite seeming to fit its surroundings. Particular standouts include Bill Fawcett's "Lincoln's Charge"; "Love Our Lockwood," in which Janet Kagan

imagines a nineteenth-century woman in the Presidency; Tappan King's "Patriot's Dream," an intensely realized portrait of Samuel Tilden; and Barbara Delaplace's smoothly executed if inevitable "No Other Choice," where Thomas Dewey confronts the nuclear option.

With a single exception, this is science fiction without spaceships and ray guns, but it's no less absorbing for the difference. The advice with which Resnick closes his introduction is succinct and appropriate: "Read early and often." *Alternate Presidents* is much too good to miss. — *J. Bunnell*

GLASS HOUSES

by Laura J. Mixon
Tor Books, May 1992
224 pages, \$3.99 (paperback)

There are plenty of novels with gritty near-future settings full of do-it-yourself high-tech gadgetry. What makes *Glass Houses* stand out from the pack is that there are a couple of cogent, clever ideas behind Laura Mixon's gadgetry, not to mention a tightly constructed plot.

The central technological marvels here are Ruby Kubick's waldos, specialized mobile robots that are remote-controlled by a complex neuro-electronic interface. The link is intense enough that when Ruby is running Golem, a giant creature designed for salvage operations, she sees through its "eyes" and refers to the connected entities as "I-Golem."

Waldos aren't unusual in Ruby's future New York, but Ruby seems to be more than usually talented in their use.

But even the superhuman Golem isn't immune to the extreme weather possible in a world altered by long-term greenhouse effects, and that fact finds Ruby-Golem sharing a collapsed skyscraper with a dying man who just happens to have a cache of top-grade diamonds in his pocket. Ruby collects not only the diamonds, but also papers that prove to be their bearer's will. Then the dead man turns out to be a major public figure, and Ruby's copy of the will isn't the same as the one his widow has. That leads Ruby and her waldos into a devious series of plots and deceptions as she tries to reunite the real will with the one young man who needs it.

Mixon makes the story work on all three of its major fronts. The waldos, and the rest of her highly computerized near-future setting, are worked out in logical detail that will please the technically minded without alienating those who don't do computers. The mystery-suspense elements are skillfully laid in, twisting back and forth with properly tense precision. In addition, the novel is also very much a story about Ruby's emergence from a shell both cybernetic and metaphorical, and Mixon's development of her central character is as well rounded as her technology.

Glass Houses is also a first novel, but you can't tell that from the text. Mixon has a confident command of her craft that puts her well ahead of most beginning writers, and watching her career develop promises to be a definite pleasure. — *J. Bunnell*

MONAD: Essays on Science Fiction
(No. 2)

edited by Damon Knight
Writer's Notebook Press
100 pages, \$5.00 (trade paper)

Damon Knight's infrequent journal of literary criticism has a simple policy: it only runs essays on the science-fiction and fantasy field by science-fiction and fantasy writers. The second issue contains essays by Brian Aldiss, John Barnes, Thomas Perry, John

Sladek, Gary Westfahl (two essays), and William F. Wu.

Not surprisingly, some of the authors chose to talk about themselves. The most interesting of this suit is Wu's "Lacks 'Oriental' Flavor," about being a fantasy and science-fiction writer of East Asian descent, and how it has affected and influenced his career in small yet significant ways. It puts more dimension to Wu's fiction, which often features Asian protagonists. John Sladek offers a self-interview, "Answers to Questions I Was Not Asked On the Radio," primarily dealing with his character Roderick and how robots are and/or should be perceived.

Others deal with more literary concerns: deconstructionism, differences between U.S. and U.K. fantasy, why Robert A. Heinlein's first story works so well (despite some criticism that it doesn't work at all), and a humorous look at sequel syndrome.

An interesting issue, overall. One thing that struck me is how much I enjoyed reading *Monad*—there are other, more scholarly literary journals which I avoid because they're generally painful to read; this one is fun and just as (if not more) interesting.

In closing, I quote from Knight's introduction:

"In the manifesto for *Monad 1* I announced that the journal would not publish essays by 'fans, academics, or anecdotalists.' I also said that it would not publish book reviews, how-to articles, fiction, poetry, or market reports.

"Nevertheless, the first issue included a long poem by Thomas Disch, and in this issue you will find two essays by Gary Westfahl, an academic. . . . Who knows? Maybe next time we will have an anecdotal market report.

"Meanwhile, I do know what I want here, and I hope I am drawing a clearer picture of it as we go: essays about science fiction that are entertaining but not frivolous, serious but not dull. Your letters and contributions are invited."

It's a good editor who will violate

his established policies to make room for good material. What more needs be said?

Monad is available from Pulp-house Publishing, P.O. Box 1227, Eugene OR 97440. Include a couple of bucks for postage and handling.
— *J. Betancourt*

GLASS HOUSES

by Laura J. Mixon
Tor Books, May 1992
224 pages, \$3.99 (paperback)

When Ruby Kubick is scavenging a ruined building in Manhattan, she meets an environmentalist whose yacht was shipwrecked below, in the now-immersed ground floor. He's injured, and when the building collapses on him, Ruby tries to rescue him. She ends up lugging a corpse to the police . . . after looting the body of jewelry and a packet which may contain interesting stuff (she'll find out later). The collapsed building has ruined the material she went in to scavenge, and the man who hired her now decides to hold a grudge and kill her. The police think she may have murdered the environmentalist. And the environmentalist's wife knows Ruby stole the pouch . . . and doesn't want it recovered, even if that means killing Ruby to keep it hidden.

If this sounds like the plot for a typical action/adventure post-environmental-holocaust story, indeed it is. The interesting parts mostly lie in the background: Ruby's method of scavenging is through telepresencing—she stays in her apartment, immersed in a tank of jelly, jacked directly into a remote-controlled robot . . . which makes a lot of sense, since the robot is working in hazardous buildings. She's a strong female lead character in a subgenre (neocyberpunk) dominated by male writers with male protagonists. Further, she's involved in a lesbian relationship, though she returns to a more traditional male-female relationship by the end.

The story is tightly focused, and Mixon carries it off perfectly well. As a first novel, it's certainly above average: the writing is slickly profes-

sional, the characters believably drawn, the action fast and convincing. Mixon isn't above playing a few games with readers, though: note the protagonist's name . . . specifically its similarity to a certain cube-shaped puzzle. And I note that, once again, Tor Books failed to note that portions of the book appeared in magazine form (is it some conspiracy at Tor to ignore the science-fiction magazines?).

Glass Houses is a pleasant way to spend an afternoon. I'll be watching for Mixon's next. — J. Betancourt

THE DARK BEYOND THE STARS

by Frank M. Robinson
Tor Books, March 1992
408 pages, \$4.99

Amnesia is the science-fiction writer's friend. Think about it: when you have a strange civilization in an odd environment, and you're telling it from the point of view of a native, it makes sense to give the native amnesia. That way he can "rediscover" his world at the same time it's revealed to the reader.

In this case the "world" is a huge generation ship searching for life on other planets—any life. There's a nearly immortal captain at the helm (he was given special anti-disease treatments before the launch, which effectively extended his lifetime to many millennia), and the crew has been breeding a new generation of explorers every twenty years or so (we're up to 102 generations when the book opens).

Sparrow, our young crewman with amnesia, had an accident on one of the planets due to faulty old equipment, or so he thinks. Someone is trying to kill him. Mutineers are plotting to take over the ship and return to Earth. A new, more empathic crew is secretly being bred in a private plot in an ongoing genetic experiment. And holograms keep a shiny veneer on what is basically a ship that's nearly worn out.

There are a lot of subplots at play, and Robinson weaves them masterfully into a very full, very rich tapestry. All the details ring true. All the characters are realistic and believable,

from the quiet revolutionaries to the bored immortal captain to our idealistic protagonist.

The Dark Between the Stars is one of the three or four near-perfect science fiction novels I've read in the last five years. Don't miss it. — J. Betancourt

A TIME OF EXILE

by Katharine Kerr
Bantam Books, June 1992
434 pages, \$4.95 (paperback)

A Time of Exile, the fifth book in Katharine Kerr's series set in the world of Deverry, starts us on a new cycle of intrigue and adventure. In the previous book, *The Dragon Revenant*, the immortal Nevyn finally completes his self-appointed task of repairing the damage he'd done to the wyrd (effectively, the karma) of his friends and lover, allowing him to become mortal and to enjoy a final peace.

Almost. While Kerr is moving her focus from the humans of Aberwyn to the elves of Elcyn, this book opens with news of Nevyn's death early on, but then backtracks in time 300 years to overlap the previous volumes at a time when the two societies were interacting, and so Nevyn and Rhodry and many of the other characters we've identified with also play integral parts in this book. This gives us a continuity bridge—this book is both new and familiar—but it's clear that the author's intent is to use the familiar to introduce us to the new and then let the old characters fade away before we get tired of them.

Deverry is a world that lives and breathes, a complex environment that Kerr has built on a strong Celtic background with some very unusual deviations, including a strong reincarnation aspect. In *A Time of Exile*, she adds in her own flavor of Faerie, where a new form of being (they aren't the classic elves or fairies, but souls stuck partially formed on the way to rebirth) entrap Dallandra, the lover of Aderyn, for a few days of entertainment. She returns to find her lover, and everyone she knows, horribly aged and having given her

up for lost many years back. Aderyn, a human magician who went to live with the Elves to share knowledge, is embittered by this.

I don't read many series. I find few of them have the depth, complexity or skillful writing to keep me interested from book to book. Too many series are flabby, expanded one-book ideas or endless rehashes; so, for me to recommend a middle book of a series means not only that I enjoyed the book, but that the entire series has been strong enough to warrant my recommending it. If you're just discovering Deverry, you might want to find *Daggerspell*, the first book in the series. But *A Time of Exile* is a good place to start as well without getting lost by the middle-of-the-series syndrome. Deverry is one universe I'll be reading about as long as Kerr chooses to write about it. — C. Von Rospach

OLE DOC METHUSELAH

by L. Ron Hubbard
Bridge Publications, April 1992
288 pages, \$18.95 (trade paper)

Bridge Publications, the publishing arm of founder L. Ron Hubbard's Scientology religion, has put together a collection of related short works by Hubbard and is making them available for the first time in years.

Frankly, I have to wonder why they bothered. There have been attempts made in the last few years to get Hubbard included in the lists of major authors of the Golden Age, even though none of his work has survived in print through the years.

As *Ole Doc Methuselah* will clearly show to anyone who tries to read it, Hubbard's work is out of print for a reason. Hubbard was a prolific author in the late 1930s and 1940s, but "prolific" isn't the same as "good."

It starts on the first page and continues through to the last. Awkward phrasing and bad grammar, literally so common throughout that you can open the book at random and be sure to find at least one howler of a bad sentence on one of the pages you turned to. Scientific ideas that were clearly impossible then. Amazingly futuristic, intelligent men in

technologically sophisticated societies doing exceptionally stupid, bonehead things.

The prose is beyond terrible, bordering on the unreadable. Considering the period when these stories were written, some leniency is called for; writers had a choice of being fast or being hungry, and few writers could be consistently fast and good. Leinster and del Rey and Asimov and Clarke could do it. Hubbard couldn't. Even someone like Lester Dent, who wrote as Kenneth Robeson for the *Doc Savage* pulp magazine, could turn out seven or eight short novels a year that might not have been art, but still were enjoyable, readable fiction. Compared to *Ole Doc Methuselah*, Dent's writing could win a Hugo.

The stories and science don't improve things. "Ole Doc Methuselah" is a member of the Universal Medical Society, a group of men who travel from star system to star system, healing the sick and meddling into the affairs of the planet. On one planet, he frees the population from slavery by ragweed. On another planet, a group of aliens have been enslaved, and their slavers start getting sick—but it's not until Methuselah arrives that anyone notices the life form being enslaved is based on plutonium.

It goes on and on. Bad writing, bad science, boring plots, dated attitudes. *Ole Doc Methuselah* is a great reminder that what we remember about the Good Old Days of SF is the good parts. This book represents a big part of the 90% that Sturgeon's Law talks about—the pieces that disappear forgotten into the mists of time. Too bad it didn't stay there. Spend your money somewhere else. — C. Von Rospach

GRIFFIN'S EGG

by Michael Swanwick
St. Martin's Press, January 1992
101 pages, \$15.95 (hardcover)

St. Martin's has started printing a series of novella-length books that were originally published in the United Kingdom. While a little shorter (and less expensive) than a typical hardcover today, if *Griffin's Egg*

is any indication, you're not going to feel shortchanged.

After the planet has been ravaged by the excesses of society to the point of disaster, industry and technology have been kicked off Earth and into space, either in orbit or on the moon. Big business is still raping the land for profits, but they're doing so out of sight of the people. All is not well on Earth, though, as the various industries and governments vie for control.

Space is a very difficult place to be when your supply lines decide to blow each other up. Worse, it seems that some of them have come into space to make sure that whatever survives they control.

Swanwick is a literate writer who focuses more on the people and the impact of a situation on them than on the technology or environment. The plot is a mystery, as the colonists try to find some important, missing technological pieces before their time runs out. More importantly, it's a story of survival during desperate times, as we watch people rise above themselves to try to make an impossible situation work. The book contains strong writing and an interesting story, but the depth and complexity of the characters is what makes *Griffin's Egg* a strong and interesting book. — C. Von Rospach

DRAGONS IN THE STARS

by Jeffrey A. Carver
Tor Books, April 1992
320 pages, \$4.99 (paperback)

Jael LeBrae wants to be a rigger, one of the individuals with the training and personality needed to survive piloting a spaceship through hyperspace. While in hyperspace, the riggers fly the ship across a landscape, much as if it were some kind of virtual reality.

But there's nothing virtual about it. Legend has it that there are dragons in the mountains, and that riggers who fly the passes of the other world don't come back.

LeBrae would love to have problems like dragons. As it stands, she can't get a job, because her father, also a rigger, did something terrible

that cost him his career. The stain on the family reputation is carrying forward. Desperate, Jael eventually takes a job with an unregistered ship, only to find out that the cargo is illegal and that the owner is using an illegal mood-altering device to turn his riggers into virtual slaves.

Desperate and scared that something terrible is going to happen, Jael tries a short cut, rigging through the mountains. And she finds the dragons.

Or, more correctly, the dragons find her. While most of the dragons try to throw her out of the sky to her doom, one befriends her and helps her through the pass.

Unbeknownst to her, Jael has started a series of events that will come to a head only when she returns to the pass and her dragon friend, and which she, as the catalyst of the prophecy, can put right.

The editor of the book, Jim Frenkel, has described *Dragons in the Stars* as Tolkienesque hard SF. On top of the technology and society that Jael was created in, Carver has laid level after level of a fantasy-like environment. When a rigger moves into hyperspace, for all the technology and hardware needed to support the transfer what he or she emerges into on the other side is a fantasy world where ships fly across the landscape being pulled by mystical beings, and where dangerous beasts live in the dark, uncharted lands.

Carver is a strong SF writer, with a good feel for both the hard SF elements and the people he populates them with. *Dragons in the Stars* takes his writing ability one step further, as he shows he is not only comfortable working with fantasy elements, but able to succeed at the tough job of melding them into a science-fictional environment without making the SF aspects of the story lose their sense of realism. This is a well-written, enjoyable book that I think will impress both the technology-oriented readers as well as social/characterization-oriented readers. — C. Von Rospach ♦

Looking Forward:

Castle of Deception

by Mercedes Lackey
and Josepha Sherman

Coming in July 1992 from Baen Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

This is the first of three novels set in the world created for *The Bard's Tale* computer games. Like any top-quality licensed product, it expands the original world and presents us with a fascinating mix of characters and places. The novel manages to take advantage of the benefits of working in a licensed world without falling victim to the pitfalls.

The main character, a young bard named Kevin, undertakes a simple mission to deliver a message for his mentor—a task that ultimately involves him with a plot to take over the kingdom. At the start of this scene, Kevin and his companion Lydia end a chase across the city with an encounter in an inn.

Lydia glanced up. "Uh, Kevin, I think we'd better get out of here. *Now.*"

Startled at the urgency in her voice, the bardling looked up. "Oh."

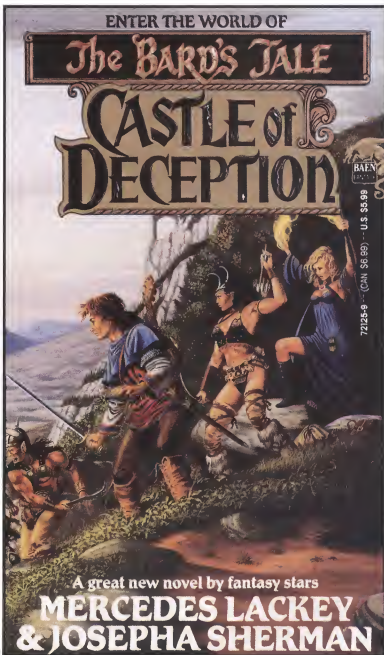
Six ugly . . . things were peering through the gloomy tavern, looking for something.

Things, Kevin decided, was definitely the word. None of them was truly human, or a member of any other recognizable race, except for their leader, who was the most depraved-looking elf the bardling could ever have imagined. Pasty-skinned and gaunt, the man's fair White Elf hair hung lankly to his shoulders, and his green White Elf eyes were flat and cold and empty. Kevin wondered what depravities could have so corrupted a creature of Light, and shuddered.

"Guess not everyone liked the idea of D'Riksin talking to us," Lydia murmured.

"You don't know they're looking for us," Kevin whispered back.

Just then, the empty-eyed elf pointed their way and yelled something at the others. All six started stalking forward, radiating menace, sending customers scrambling out of their way.



Cover art by Larry Elmore

"Hell I don't," Lydia said drily. "All right," she added under her breath. "I've been in tighter fixes than this. Gotten out of them, too. Follow my lead, Kevin. Ready? Here we go!"

She stood up, grabbed a customer at random, and flattened him with one mighty punch. The man staggered back into another table, which collapsed, spilling their drinks all over the men who'd been sitting there.

"Hey, watch it, you stupid *Ertich*!"

"*Ertich*, is it?" growled an ogre at the next table. "I'm an *Ertich*, you idiot humans!"

He dove into the humans, swinging wildly, sending men and chairs flying. For one shocked moment, Kevin froze. Then he realized exactly what Lydia was doing and grabbed another man, about to imitate her.

No, no, I nearly wrecked my hand the last time I tried to punch someone! Can't risk that again!

What to do? The bardling snatched up a half-empty flagon instead, and whapped the man soundly over the head. Mereot splashed all over a heavyset, scaly whatever-it-was at the next table. The creature sprang up with a furious hiss, only to collide with one of the men from the first table, who was blindly throwing punches right and left. The creature flattened him, and went looking for other prey. Those customers who hadn't already taken cover found themselves caught in the middle of an ever-growing melee—and joined in with savage glee. The empty-eyed elf and his men swore helplessly as the brawl engulfed them in a whirlwind of fists and bottles.

Lydia, standing safely out of the way, gave a sharp laugh. "Nothing like a good old-fashioned tavern brawl for a diversion! Come on, Kevin, let's get out of here."

She slipped out through the tiny kitchen, Kevin close behind her, struggling past servants who were heading out into the brawl armed with clubs and broom handles.

Hey, where had Lydia gone?

"Out here!" the woman called, and the bardling scrambled out the narrow window after her. "Now you know why I'm always scouting for ways out of places! Come on, let's put some distance between ourselves and those guys."

More running, Kevin thought wearily.

They made it all the way back to the shabby square. The bardling sank gladly to the lip of the dry fountain, panting, the lute an awkward weight on his back. He shifted it around in front of him, leaning on it. "Think we're safe?"

Lydia straightened, listening to nothing but silence. She shrugged. "For the moment. By the time old Empty Eyes fights his way out of that tavern, our trail's going to be tight."

We hope. "Now what do we do?"

"Look for the others, I guess, and—"

"There you are!" a shrill voice snapped.

Kevin glanced up to see the fairy fluttering fiercely overhead. "Hello, Tich'ki!"

"Never mind 'Hello, Tich'ki!' I've been flying all over the city. Where the *hell* were you two?"

"Hunting rats." Lydia grinned. "Learned a lot from them, too."

The fairy landed lightly beside her. "And nearly got bit by them, I see. Oh yes, I heard all the fuss. What's the matter, the guards weren't good enough for you? Robbing a councilman wasn't exciting enough?"

"Ah, you're a fine one to scold! It wasn't me who set that inn on fire back in Elegian—"

"An accident. I never knew the spell would backfire like that."

"—or dropped the chamber pot on the mayor's head in Smithian."

The fairy grinned. "Nearly tore a wing lifting the thing. Worth it, though."

"Besides," Lydia added, "you know I didn't rob Selden. Not exactly. Look, Tich'ki, you were there! It was a game of cards, that's all. He wasn't any more honest than me."

"Tell that to the guards." The fairy glanced sharply from one human to the other. "You reek of excitement. Haven't just been eluding guards, have you?"

"Uh, no," Lydia admitted. "We seem to have gotten somebody's gang after us, too."

"Huh. And you tell *me* to keep out of trouble? Tell me, just how do you plan to get out of Western?"

Lydia shrugged. "We'll think of something."

"We can't leave without the rest of our party," Kevin cut in.

"Sure, but they could be anywhere."

"They're both still in the city." Tich'ki restlessly folded and refolded her wings. "Wouldn't have left without their horses. And those horses are still here. I checked."

Kevin straightened, hands tightening on the lute case. "Tich'ki, you're friends with Naitachal."

"Well . . ."

"All right, all right, maybe you're not friends. But at least you two must have something in common. I saw you doing those card tricks together."

"What's this?" Lydia asked, eyebrow raised.

Tich'ki's dusky skin flushed. "He asked me. What was I supposed to do? Tell him he wasn't bright enough to learn?"

"Teaching him tricks, eh?"

"Card tricks!"

"And was that all you were doing, hmm?"

"Lydia, that's ridiculous! Look at the size of me! He's more than twice my height!"

"Why, Tich'ki! Aren't your people wonderful shape-changers? I should think you could be any size you want to be."

Kevin stared from Lydia to Tich'ki. "I don't understand you two! We've got all sorts of people out to get us. How can you possibly waste time in—in banter?"

They both looked at him in surprise. Lydia shook her head. "Would anything be changed if we acted like scared little kids?"

"No, but—"

"Morale, Kevin, got to keep up morale. Just as," she added slyly, "Tich'ki was keeping Naitachal's morale up."

Cornered, the fairy took to the air. Still blushing, she yelled down, "You *know* I don't date outside my species!"

"Since when are elves and fairies separate—"

"All right! All right! I'll go look for him. You stay here."

As the fairy darted up and away, Lydia murmured a bemused, "Card tricks?"

"That's all it was, really," Kevin said.

"Oh, I figured that. But how often do I get a chance to rib a fairy?" All at once she frowned. "I know I said something about keeping up morale, but this hardly seems the time for a song! Why are you taking out your lute?"

"I'm going to try something," Kevin paused, one hand caressing the polished wood. "I only hope it works."

"What are you talking about?"

"There's a song that's supposed to draw someone you know to you. I'm going to try it on Eliathanis."

"You don't exactly know him."

"Well, no. But he's an elf, after all. Even if I can't manage the whole force of Bardic Magic, he should have enough innate magic to sense *something*."

"Always assuming he wants to listen."

"If the song works properly, he . . . uh . . . won't have a choice."

Lydia raised an eyebrow. "Only hope you don't call up Empty Eye from the gang as well. He's an elf, too. More or less," she added in distaste.

"Oh. Well." Kevin hadn't thought of that. "It . . . should work only on Eliathanis." *I hope.*

Bending over the lute, the bardling tuned it carefully, then took a deep breath and began his song, trying to picture the White Elf and only the White Elf, hearing the coaxing strains soar out and out . . .

The bardling came back to himself with a start, startled to realize he didn't know how much time had passed. It must have been quite a while, because his fingers weary and throat dry. "What—Naitachal!"

The Dark Elf bowed wryly. "Surprised to see me? Returning was the only way I could get that fairy to stop pestering me!"

"Huh!" Tich'ki said indignantly. "You were the one who kept asking me questions!"

"And you were the one who wouldn't answer any of them!" Naitachal grinned. "I confess: Tich'ki kept after me till she'd roused my curiosity."

"I'm sure," Lydia murmured.

Kevin nearly choked. But then the urge to laugh faded as he realized: "I guess my song didn't work."

"Oh, it did!" an angry voice snapped, and the bardling shot to his feet. "It did, indeed!"

"Eliathanis!"

"You just would *not* stop pulling at my mind! I was in the middle of learning some information, and you—"

"What's this?" Tich'ki wondered, fluttering around the White Elf. "You're such a fair-haired fellow. What are red hairs doing to your shoulder?"

"Never mind that!" Eliathanis hastily brushed them from him.

"Mmm, and what's this?" She sniffed audibly. "You taken to wearing perfume, elf?"

"No!" His fair skin reddened. "It—I—"

"Oh, you were learning something, all right!" the fairy taunted. "And I'm sure it was pretty important, too! Maybe nothing to do with the stolen girl, but—"

"I was talking to a troupe of dancing girls," the White

Elf said with immense dignity. Struggling to ignore Lydia's delighted whoop, he continued, "They travel all over the country. I thought they might know Charina's whereabouts."

"And they really *bated* talking to such a pretty fellow," Tich'ki teased, then darted sideways in the air as Eliathanis, his face a fiery red by now, took a swipe at her.

"You never *will* catch me like that, elf!" she mocked.

"Can't you be serious for even a moment?"

"Now, now, Eliathanis." Naitachal's voice was studiously serious, but his eyes glinted under the black hood. "Seems to me you're hardly the one to accuse anyone else of frivolity. Tsk, should have known there was something warmer than ice under that grim facade!"

"Don't you dare criticize me, necromancer!"

"Oh for Powers' sakes!" Lydia cried. "You two aren't going to start that again, are you?"

"What do you expect of elves?" Tich'ki laughed.

"They're almost as bad as humans!"

"Hey, whose side are you on, fairy?"

"My own, of course!"

Eliathanis frowned at Lydia. "Woman, I don't need to be defended from the likes of her!"

This is getting out of hand, Kevin knew. *If we don't work everything out now, we're going to wind up in prison. Or dead.*

Kevin licked his dry lips, thinking feverishly. Maybe he hadn't acted like a leader up to now. Maybe that was because he had been trying too hard to imitate the leaders in the heroic songs, those miracles of bravery who were gifted with unfailing charisma. Well, that was nonsense! The boy who had left Bracklin might never have accepted it, but he was no longer so naive. Such marvelous, infallible heroes like that could never have existed—but those like Master Aidan most certainly did. Master Aidan and those other good, sensible, down-to-earth people who'd saved King Amber. People who tried to understand those they were supposed to lead, who brought them together and got them to concentrate on their goal!

"All right," Kevin began.

Nobody noticed.

"I said, *all right!*"

As the others turned to him, he added sternly, "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? Did you really mean to rob Count Volmar?"

Ha, that made them start. "What do you mean?" Eliathanis asked coldly. "I am not a thief."

"No? You certainly aren't earning your keep! You were hired to rescue the Lady Charina—not to fight with each other! But bickering seems to be all you can do!"

"Now, Kevin," Lydia began, "that's hardly fair—"

"Let me finish!" He glared at them all. "Eliathanis and Naitachal: I know there are long hatreds between White and Dark Elves. I know those hatreds go back for generations. I don't expect either one of you to settle such ancient grudges overnight. But I don't think elves of either race had anything to do with the kidnapping—and if you really mean to show your peoples' innocence the way you boasted, you had better stop fighting and show some of that famous elvish self-control!" ♦

Red Planet, Green Planet

Stephen L. Gillett

Mars has been the easy planet to terraform—at least in SF. Just smash in a few comets, or squirt in a few rocketfuls of greenhouse gases, or even (as at least one naive story had it) set off a volcano or two with A-bombs. Presto! You've got warmth, gases, rain and liquid water . . . gosh, all you need then is the land offices!

UH-uh. Won't work, any of it. Mars's present environment is *stable*. As you might expect: it's been there for a while, after all. Comets even crash into it once in a while all by themselves, and not much happens when they do.

Why is Mars so stable? It's *cold*. That's the biggest reason, and a subtle reason. It's so cold its very air freezes out at the poles in the wintertime. And that makes Mars very hard to warm up.

Let's see why. One obvious way to warm Mars up, of course, would be to set up a greenhouse effect—to trap solar heat by gases in the atmosphere, so that the air acts like a blanket around the planet. Maybe if you could just boost air pressure, then, the air would hold in more heat.

In fact, the atmosphere might then get thicker and warmer all by itself. If there were enough stuff lying around that would thaw or evaporate, it would thicken the atmosphere even more, so that the air would hold in heat even better, so that *more* gases would evaporate . . . etc. Such a "runaway" to a thicker,

warmer atmosphere was even bandied around in the scientific community for a while, back in the early 1970s. Maybe the great "Martian spring" happened every 100,000 years or so when periodic orbital changes increased average sunlight, so that Mars suddenly warmed up.

But it's not that simple.

As you probably know, Mars's atmosphere is nearly all carbon dioxide. But it's just a wisp. It's far thinner than most people—even many scientists—had thought before the Mariner IV flyby in 1964.

And—yes—Mars is also a lot colder than most people had thought. The white polar caps, which wax and wane with the seasons, and which were confidently assumed to be water ice by generations of SF writers (and even by a few astronomers) are solid CO₂.

So, as it gets colder in the winter, the atmosphere actually freezes out on the ground at the pole. In summertime, the CO₂ warms up and sublimates again; but then it's winter at the other pole, so the CO₂ just freezes out there instead!

This freeze-out fixes (or "buffers," as scientists say) Mars's atmospheric pressure. The pressure is set by the chemical equilibrium of gaseous CO₂ with dry ice, so you can see why Mars's air is so wispy. If you add more CO₂, it just freezes out again.

This is, incidentally, just the way the water vapor content of Earth's atmosphere is set by evaporation from Earth's oceans. Water evapo-

rates until it saturates the atmosphere; that is, till it brings the atmosphere to 100% humidity. (On the average, of course; far inland, the humidity can be a lot less than 100% because the soggy air can't make it in from the ocean. Most of Earth's air, though, is pretty close to saturated with water vapor.) Thus, the only way to permanently increase the amount of water vapor in our air is to raise the temperature. Just adding water won't do!

Now we can see why just adding carbon dioxide to boost the Martian greenhouse effect won't work. But what about using some other gas instead, one that won't freeze out? What about that hoary notion of slamming a comet or asteroid in? They don't contain CO₂, do they?

Actually, they *do* contain CO₂. But the big problem is that other naturally occurring gases either also freeze out under Martian conditions, or else they break up chemically under the action of sunlight. Or else they just don't do any good.

Most of a comet, for example, is just water ice—some 80%, according to the Comet Halley missions. But water freezes at much higher temperatures than CO₂ does. On Mars, a small, residual permanent polar cap remains visible at one pole even at the height of summer. This remnant cap is probably water ice, and it *never* thaws. (It may be important in the future, though, as I'll discuss below.) So bringing in water won't raise the temperature, either.

What about methane, then? It won't freeze out under Martian conditions. And it's supposed to be abundant in the outer Solar System. And it's a good greenhouse gas. Two problems, though: first, methane is rapidly destroyed—"photodissociated"—by solar ultraviolet light (UV). Its lifetime in Mars's atmosphere would be measured in mere decades, if indeed not in mere years. Second, although methane is abundant in the gas giants' atmospheres, there's not much in a comet—a few percent at most. (In fact, according to the flyby studies there's as much CO₂ as methane on Halley.)

Ammonia is another greenhouse gas that's common in the gas giants. But there's even less ammonia than methane in a comet, and anyway, it's even more fraught with problems. Not only does it photodissociate easily, but it freezes out to boot. It's glommed onto very effectively by water or water ice.

Surprisingly, there's a lot more nitrogen than ammonia in comets—at least, again, if Halley is typical. And nitrogen won't freeze out under Martian conditions, either. But—alas!—nitrogen isn't a greenhouse gas.

Similarly, CO—carbon monoxide—proved to be the most abundant carbon-bearing gas on Halley. It's almost ten times as abundant as CO₂ or CH₄ (methane). It also doesn't freeze out under Mars conditions, and it would be a lot more stable than methane in Mars's atmosphere.

But CO also is not a greenhouse gas. Although it has infrared absorption bands, they're in the wrong place for a greenhouse effect, at least on a terrestrial planet. Besides, using an atmosphere of CO for "terraforming" is a bit bizarre—the gas is quite poisonous. Under a CO atmosphere, *everything* would have to be leakproof to an absurd degree. Even a hundred parts per million of CO can kill. Good ol' vacuum is better than an atmosphere like that.

All in all, we need a greenhouse gas that's stable, nontoxic, and that won't freeze out, and such an animal doesn't occur naturally. One possibility, proposed by Allenby and Lovelock in their book *The Greening*

of Mars, is chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). These are the gases, used in refrigerators and air conditioners, that are diminishing the Earth's ozone layer. But aside from causing ozone destruction, the gases are also excellent greenhouse gases—literally millions of times more effective than CO₂.

Allenby and Lovelock's scenario was (presumably) somewhat tongue in cheek: they proposed putting surplus CFCs in surplus missile nose cones and sending both to Mars. An arithmetic reality check shows that we need far more gas than that—CFCs aren't *that* efficient!

Of course, this is a general problem with terraforming: there's lots of material involved. Planets are *big*. (The scale of planets has saved us with the Earth, though—the sheer size of our planet buffers changes. It takes a *lot* of human activity even to be noticeable. But I digress.)

Dr. Chris McKay at NASA's Ames Research Center, who's thought a lot about Mars terraforming, has come up with more realistic CFC scenarios. CFCs *are* efficient enough that you can consider manufacturing them for Mars warming. Even so, though, the tonnages you require still mean a substantial industrial base either on Mars or in space. (The fact that CFCs would also preclude a Martian ozone layer is a secondary problem, at least for now. By the way, CFCs also starred in Kathy Tyers's recent terraforming novel *Shivering World*.)

Traditionally, warming Mars has looked fairly easy. McKay made BOTE (Back of the Envelope) calculations of the energy requirements, and concluded that if Mars absorbed the solar energy falling on it with only 1% efficiency, it would take only 100 years.

But as I said, it's traditionally been hoped that if Mars could just be warmed a bit, to get past the CO₂ buffering, then the warming would accelerate all by itself. And that's what McKay assumed in the calculation above.

The reason for this optimism was that volatiles (the low-boiling point substances that make up atmospheres and oceans) seemed to be one thing Mars probably has. Those

channels, familiar from the Viking photos, were probably cut by flowing water. In fact, some planetary geologists think an ancient ocean covered most of Mars's northern hemisphere. The polar caps, and the layers of ancient sediments underlying them, maybe also store water. We *do* see that permanent polar cap, remember. Pernafröst—permanently frozen ground—on Mars could also store water ice, and maybe even absorbed CO₂.

But: there's no reason to think that just because lots of volatiles were around a few billion years ago, they're still around—at least in any convenient or useful form. When you go to calculate how much absorbed gas the surface of Mars could hold, it doesn't look like very much.

What more likely happened is that the volatiles have mostly been lost, either into space or into chemical combination in the crust. Mars probably has lost lots of water, for example. Not only has photodissociation by solar UV destroyed it, but it's also probably reacted to make hydrous minerals in the crust. At that point the water's lost almost as effectively as if it had escaped to space.

For another example, a lot of CO₂ may have precipitated out into carbonates such as limestone. Then, as the greenhouse effect lessened with the dwindling atmospheric CO₂, Mars just got colder and colder and colder. This "runaway deep freeze" is the opposite of what happened to Venus (as I described in "The Air We're Standing On," March 1992).

We can contrast both planets with Earth: here, CO₂ probably fine-tunes our climate. If things get too cool, more CO₂ accumulates in the atmosphere, the greenhouse effect goes up—and things warm up again. Conversely, if the climate gets too hot, CO₂ is precipitated by rock made available through more effective weathering, the greenhouse effect goes down, and the Earth cools back off.

For this to work, though, you need a planet with active tectonics—the mountain-building processes that churn the crust. In this way, limestone won't stay buried; it gets carried down deeply and "cooked" so

the CO₂ can come out of volcanoes again. On Earth, plate tectonics does this nicely, but Mars is too small to have effective tectonics. So once the CO₂ precipitates out, it stays precipitated out!

As Martyn Fogg has pointed out in the *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society*, if Mars's CO₂ is really mostly locked up in limestone, it won't be convenient to extract. Limestones are stable rocks. Here on Earth, they're broken down in limekilns to make lime for mortar—but it takes temperatures around 1200° F. A nice bright orange heat . . .

Fogg proposes breaking up Martian carbonates with a well-understood, fairly cheap technology that releases an immense amount of heat in a small area: a hydrogen bomb. Just touch off a few in places where carbonates are concentrated.

A cheap approach, but not very subtle! And it may not even work if concentrated deposits of Martian limestone don't even exist. If the carbonates are merely strewn through ordinary Mars dirt as an impurity, gathering together enough of them to process will be difficult. Maybe we need to bring in some comets after all. . . .

In fact, where did Mars's volatiles come from originally? Traditionally, volatiles have been thought to be "outgassed"—spewed out of volcanoes after a newly formed planet has stewed for a while. Hence that notion of making a Martian atmosphere by unplugging a volcano—although you wouldn't get nearly enough gas from just a volcano or two to matter. There's that problem of the sheer *size* of a planet again. (Not to mention that the gas will freeze out, too.)

Even worse, though: the volatiles may not have come from outgassing in the first place! A new opinion among some scientists is that they were plastered on instead by giant impacts at the very end of accretion. These impacting bodies would have

formed farther from the Sun, so they would contain more volatiles. This means, then, that the outgassing we see on Earth is largely of recycled volatiles—seawater carried down into the mantle by the descending plates. The steam that made the blast at Mt. St. Helens came ultimately from the Pacific.

Even once you somehow get a thick atmosphere, by dint of lots of warming (and maybe by bringing in a few comets too), you're confronted with another big problem. An earthlike atmosphere needs lots of free oxygen.

A lot *more* energy is needed to break out oxygen for the air, either from CO₂ by photosynthesis, or directly from rocks. If you only use photosynthesis, it will take a while (McKay estimates around 100,000 years), because biological processes like that just aren't be very efficient. Alternatively, if you make massive quantities of oxygen by "brute force" with an industrial establishment, terraforming gets *very* expensive.

Again here's that "not quick and dirty after all" problem showing up.

And last come a few other problems, both short-term and long-term:

First, oxygen's also not a greenhouse gas, so once we start putting lots of it in the air, Mars is likely to cool off again. (After all that painful warming!) In fact, when photosynthetic microbes first started putting O₂ in Earth's atmosphere a couple billion years or so ago, the oxygen may have cooled off Earth a lot—even causing a major glaciation or two.

Second, we can't leave too much CO₂ in the atmosphere, even though we'll need a greenhouse effect. The CO₂ content has to be less than 1% if the air is to be breathable by humans long-term. For Mars, that means the CFC factories are going to need to keep humming. Left to itself, the new Earthlike atmosphere would eventually freeze out again.

Third, Mars doesn't have much

nitrogen. It seems to have lost an awful lot to space, although there may also be some in the surface, chemically combined into nitrates. If not, though, that's another reason we'll have to import a comet or two. Nitrogen, of course, is needed for ongoing life support.

A fourth problem is Mars's lack of plate tectonics. One thing plate tectonics has done on Earth is stew out the crust very effectively. The continual recycling has efficiently separated out many elements, some of which are important nutrients.

One such is potassium. It's abundant in Earth's upper crust; in fact, potassium feldspar is one of the major minerals in granite, one of the rocks typical of Earth's continental crust. Potassium is apparently rare in other planetary crusts, though, simply because they haven't been efficiently separated out. Granite is extremely rare on the Moon, for example.

So potassium mines may be necessary on terraformed Mars, for fertilizer and other life support. In fact, as vegetation takes hold, potassium deficiency may be a big factor keeping the plants from growing or spreading any faster.

And last, keeping Mars terraformed may be a challenge, at least at timescales approaching geologic. (And if the planet doesn't stay terraformed all by itself for a *long* time, why bother? The reason to terraform is to set up a self-maintaining planetary environment. If you don't have *that*, you've just got a very expensive space colony.) Without any crustal overturn, we're going to have to keep things warmed up ourselves.

Mars is easier to terraform than Venus (the subject of next month's column). But "easier" is relative; it's still not "easy." And it won't be quick.

And it may not even be permanent. ♦



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The Ship Who Searched

Part One: Eyas



Anne McCaffrey
and
Mercedes Lackey

The ruby light on the com unit was blinking when Hypatia Cade emerged from beneath the tutors' hood, with quadratic equations dancing before her seven-year-old eyes. Not the steady blink that meant a recorded message, nor the triple-beat that meant Mum or Dad had left her a note, but the double blink with a pause between each pair that meant there was someone Upstairs, waiting for her to open the channel.

Someone Upstairs meant an unscheduled ship—Tia knew very well when all the scheduled visits were; they were on the family calendar and were the first things reported by the AI when they all had breakfast. That made it important for her to answer, quickly, and not take the time to suit up and run to the dig for Mum or Dad. It must not have been an emergency, though, or the AI would have interrupted her lesson.

She rubbed her eyes to rid them of the dancing variables, and pushed her stool over to the com console so she could

Illustration by Stephen Hickman

reach all the touch-pads when she stood on it. She would never have been able to reach things sitting in a chair, of course. With brisk efficiency that someone three times her age might have envied, she cleared the board, warmed up the relay, and opened the line.

"Exploratory Team Cee-One-Two-One," she enunciated carefully, for the microphone was old, and often lost anything not spoken clearly. "Exploratory Team Cee-One-Two-One, receiving. Come in, please. Over."

She counted out the four-second lag to orbit and back, nervously. *One-hypotenuse, Two-hypotenuse, Three-hypotenuse, Four-hypotenuse.* Who could it be? They didn't get unscheduled ships very often, and it meant bad news as often as not. Planet Pirates, Plague, or Slavers. Trouble with some of the colony-planets. Or worse—artifact thieves in the area. A tiny dig like this one was all too vulnerable to a hit-and-run raid. Of course, digs on the Salomon-Kildaire Entities rarely yielded anything a collector would lust after, but would thieves know that? Tia had her orders if raiders came and she was alone—to duck into the hidden escape tunnel that would blow the dome; to run to the dark little hidey away from the dig that was the first thing Mum and Dad put in once the dome was up. . . .

"This is courier TM Three-Seventy. Tia, dearest, is that you? Don't worry, love, we have a non-urgent message run and you're on the way, so we brought you your packets early. Over." The rich, contralto voice was a bit flattened by the poor speaker, but still welcome and familiar. Tia jumped up and down a bit on her stool in excitement.

"Moira! Yes, yes, it's me! But—" She frowned a little. The last time Moira had been here, her designation had been CM, not TM. "Moira, what happened to Charlie?" Her seven-year-old voice took on the half-scolding tones of someone much older. "Moira, did you scare away *another* brawn? Shame on you! Remember what they told you when you kicked Ari out your airlock! Uh—over."

Four seconds; an eternity. "I didn't scare him away, darling," Moira replied, though Tia thought she sounded just a little guilty. "He decided to get married, raise a brood of his own, and settle down as a dirtsider. Don't worry; this will be the last one, I'm sure of it. Tomas and I get along famously. Over."

"That's what you said about Charlie," Tia reminded her darkly. "And about Ari, and Lilian, and Jules, and—"

She was still reciting names when Moira interrupted her. "Turn on the landing beacon, Tia, please. We can talk when I'm not burning fuel in orbital adjustments." Her voice turned a little bit sly. "Besides, I brought you a birthday present. That's why I couldn't miss stopping here. Over."

As if a birthday present was going to distract her from the litany of Moira's failed attempts to settle on a brawn! Well—maybe just a little.

She turned on the beacon, then, feeling a little smug, activated the rest of the landing sequence, bringing up the pad lights and guidance monitors, then hooking in the AI and letting it know it needed to talk to Moira's navigational system. She hadn't known how to do all

that, the last time Moira was here. Moira had had to set down with no help at all.

She leaned forward for the benefit of the mike. "All clear and ready to engage landing sequence, Moira. Uh—what did you bring me? Over."

"Oh, you bright little penny!" Moira exclaimed, her voice brimming with delight. "You've got the whole system up! You *have* been learning things since I was here last! Thank you, dear—and you'll find out what I brought when I get down there. Over and out."

Oh well, she had tried. She jumped down from her stool, letting the AI that ran the house and external systems take over the job of bringing the brainship in. Or rather, giving the brainship the information she needed to bring *herself* in; Moira never handed over her helm to anyone if she had a choice in the matter. That was part of the problem she'd had with keeping brawns. She didn't trust them at the helm, and let them know that. Ari, in particular, had been less than amused with her attitude and had actually tried to disable her helm controls to prove *he* could pilot as well as she.

Now, the next decision: should she suit up and fetch Mum and Dad? It was no use trying to get them on the com; they probably had their suit-speakers off. Even though they weren't *supposed* to do that. And this wasn't an emergency; they would be decidedly annoyed if she buzzed them, and they found out it was just an unscheduled social call from a courier ship, even if it was Moira. They might be more than annoyed if they were in the middle of something important, like documenting a find or running an age-assay, and she joggled their elbows.

Moira didn't say it was important. She wouldn't have talked about errant brawns and birthday presents if what she carried was really, really earth-shaking.

Tia glanced at the clock; it wasn't more than a half-hour until lunch break. If there was one thing that Pota Andropolous-Cade (Doctor of Science in Bio-Forensics, Doctor of Xenology, Doctor of Archeology) and her husband Braddon Maartens-Cade (Doctor of Science in Geology, Doctor of Physics in Cosmology, Associate Degree in Archeology, and licensed Astrogator) had in common—besides daughter Hypatia and their enduring, if absent-minded, love for each other—it was punctuality. At precisely oh seven hundred every "morning," no matter where they were, the Cades had breakfast together. At precisely twelve hundred, they arrived at the dome for lunch together. The AI saw that Hypatia had a snack at sixteen hundred. And at precisely nineteen hundred, the Cades returned from the dig for dinner together.

So in thirty minutes, *precisely*, Pota and Braddon would be here. Moira couldn't possibly land in less than ten minutes. The visitor—or visitors; there was no telling if there was someone on board besides the brawn, the yet-unmet Tomas—would not have long to wait.

She trotted around the living room of the dome, picking up her books and puzzles, straightening the pillows on the sofa, turning on lights and the holoscape of waving blue trees by a green lagoon, on Mycon, where her parents had met. She told the kitchen to start coffee, overriding the lunch-program to instruct it to make selection

V-1, a setup program Braddon had logged for her for munchies for visitors. She decided on music on her own: the *Arkenstone Suite*, a lively synthesizer piece she thought matched the holomural.

There wasn't much else to do, so she sat down and waited—something she had learned how to do very early in her life. She thought she did it very well, actually. There had certainly been enough of it in her life. The lot of an archeologists' child was full of waiting, usually alone, and required her to be mostly self-sufficient.

She had never had playmates, or been around very many children of her own age. Usually Mum and Dad were alone on a dig, for they specialized in Class One Evaluation sites; when they weren't, it was usually on a Class Two dig, Exploratory. Never a Class Three Excavation dig, with hundreds of people and their families. It wasn't often that the other scientists her parents' age on a Class Two dig had children younger than their teens. And even those were usually away somewhere at school.

She knew that other people thought that the Cades were eccentric for bringing their daughter with them on every dig—especially so young a child. Most parents with a remote job to do left their offspring with relatives, or sent them to boarding schools. Tia listened to the adults around her, who usually spoke as if she couldn't understand what they were talking about. She learned a great deal that way; probably more even than her Mum and Dad suspected.

One of the things she overheard—quite frequently, in fact—was that she seemed like something of an afterthought. Or perhaps an "accident"—she'd overheard that before, too.

She knew very well what was meant by the "afterthought or accident" comment. The last time someone had said *that*, she'd decided that she had heard it often enough.

It had been at a reception, following the reading of several scientific papers. She had marched straight up to the lady in question, and had informed her solemnly that she, Tia, had been planned very *carefully*, thank you. That Braddon and Pota had determined that their careers would be secure just about when Pota's biological clock had the last few seconds on it, and *that* was when they would have one, singular, female child. Herself. Hypatia. Planned from the beginning. From the leave-time to give birth to the way she had been brought on each assignment; from the pressure-bubble glove-box that had served as her cradle until she could crawl, to the pressure-tent that became a crib, to the kind of AI that would best perform the dual functions of tutor and guardian.

The lady in question, red-faced, hadn't known what to say. Her escort had tried to laugh it away, telling her that the "child" was just parroting what she'd overheard and couldn't possibly understand any of it.

Whereupon Tia, well versed in the ethnological habits—including courtship and mating—of four separate sapient species, including *bomo sap.*, had proceeded to prove that he was wrong.

Then, while the escort was still spluttering, she had turned back to the original offender and informed her,

with earnest sincerity, that *she* had better think about having *her* children soon too, since it was obvious that *she* couldn't have much more time before menopause.

Tia had, quite literally, silenced that section of the room. When reproached later for her behavior by the host of the party, Tia had been completely unrepentant. "She was being rude and nasty," Tia had said. When the host protested that the remark hadn't been meant for her, Tia had replied, "Then she shouldn't have said it so loudly that everyone else laughed. And besides," she had continued with inexorable logic, "Being rude *about* someone is worse than being rude *to* them."

Braddon, summoned to deal with his erring daughter, had shrugged casually and said only, "I warned you. And you didn't believe me."

Though exactly what it was Dad had warned Doctor Julius about, Tia never discovered.

The remarks about being "unplanned" or an "accident" stopped, at least in her presence—but people still seemed concerned that she was "too precocious," and that she had no one of her own age to socialize with.

But the fact was that Tia simply didn't care that she had no other children to play with. She had the best lessons in the known universe, via the database; she had the AI to talk to. She had plenty of things to play with and lots of freedom to do what she wanted once lessons were done. And most of all, she had Mum and Dad, who spent *hours* more with her than most people spent with their children. She knew that, because both the statistics in the books she had read on child care and the Socrates, the AI that traveled with them everywhere, told her so. They were never boring, and they always talked to her as if she was grown up. If she didn't understand something, all she had to do was tell them and they would backtrack and explain until she did. When they weren't doing something that meant they needed all their concentration, they encouraged her to come out to the digs with them when her lessons were over. She hadn't ever heard of too many children who got to be with their parents at work.

If *anything*, sometimes Mum and Dad explained a little too much. She distinctly remembered the time that she started asking "Why?" to everything. Socrates told her that "Why?" was a stage all children went through—mostly to get attention. But Pota and Braddon had taken her literally. . . .

The AI told her not long ago that her "Why?" period might have been the shortest on record—because Mum and Dad answered every "Why?" in detail. *And* made sure she understood, so that she wouldn't ask that particular "Why?" again.

After a month, "Why?" wasn't fun anymore, and she went on to other things.

She really didn't miss other children at all. Most of the time when she'd encountered them, it had been with the wary feeling of an anthropologist approaching a new and potentially dangerous species. The feeling seemed to be mutual. And so far, other children had proven to be rather boring creatures. Their interests and their worlds were very narrow; their vocabulary a fraction of

Tia's. Most of them hadn't the faintest idea of how to play chess, for instance.

Mum had a story she told at parties, about how Tia, at the age of two, had stunned an overly effusive professional spouse into absolute silence. There had been a chess set, a lovely antique, up on one of the tables just out of Tia's reach. She had stared longingly at it for nearly half an hour before the lady noticed what she was looking at.

Tia remembered that incident quite well, too. The lady had picked up an intricately carved knight, and wagged it at her. "See the horse?" she had gushed. "Isn't it a pretty horse?"

Tia's sense of fitness had been outraged—and that wasn't all. Her intelligence had been insulted, and she was *very* well aware of it.

She had stood up, very straight, and looked the lady right in the eye. "Is *not* a horse," she had announced, coldly and clearly. "Is a *knight*. It moves like the letter L. And Mum says it is piece most often sacri—sacer—sacra—"

Mum had come up by then, as she grew red-faced, trying to remember how to say the word she wanted. "Sacrificed?" Mum had asked, helpfully. "It means 'given up.'"

Beaming with gratitude, Tia had nodded. "Most often given up after the pawn." Then she glared at the lady. "Which is *not* a little man!"

The lady had retired to a corner and did not emerge while Tia and her parents were there. Although her Mum's superior had then taken down the set and challenged Tia to a game. He had won, of course, but she had at least shown she really knew how to play. He had been impressed and intrigued, and had taken her out on the porch to point out various species of birds at the feeders there.

She couldn't help but think that she affected grownups in only two ways. They were either delighted by her, or scandalized by her. Moira was among the "delighted" sort, though most of her brawns hadn't been. Charlie had, though, which was why she had thought that he just might be the one to stay with the brainship. He actually seemed to enjoy the fact that she could beat him at chess.

She sighed. Probably this new brawn would be of the other sort.

Not that it really mattered how she affected adults. She didn't see that many of them, and then it was never for very long. Though it was important to impress Mum's and Dad's superiors in a positive sense. She at least knew that much now.

"Your visitor is at the airlock," said the AI, breaking in on her thoughts. "His name is Tomas. While he is cycling, Moira would like you to have me turn on the ground-based radio link so that she can join the conversation."

"Go ahead, Socrates," she told the AI. That was the problem with AIs; if they didn't already have instructions, you had to tell them to do something before they would, where a shellperson would just do it if it made sense.

"Tomas has your birthday present," Moira said, a moment later. "I hope you like it."

"You mean, you hope I like *him*," she replied shrewdly. "You hope I don't scare him."

"Let's say I use you as a kind of litmus test, all right?" Moira admitted. "And, darling—Charlie really *did* fall in love with a ground-pounder. Even I could see he wanted to be with her more than he wanted space." She sighed. "It was really awfully romantic; you don't see old-style love-at-first-sight anymore. Michiko is such a charming little thing—I really can't blame him. And it's partly your fault, dear. He was so taken with you that all he could talk about was how he wanted children just like you. Well, anyway, she persuaded Admin to find him a ground job, and they traded me Tomas for him, with no fine, because it wasn't my fault this time."

"It's going to take you *forever* to buy out those fines for bouncing brawns," Tia began, when the inner airlock door cycled, and a pressure-suited person came through, holding a box and his helmet.

Tia frowned at seeing the helmet; he'd taken it off in the lock, once the pressure was equalized. That wasn't a good idea, because locks had been known to blow, especially old ones like the Class One digs had. So already he was one in the minus column as far as Tia was concerned. But he had a nice face, with kind eyes, and that wasn't so bad; a round, tanned face, with curly black hair and bright brown eyes, and a wide mouth that didn't have those tense lines at the corners that Ari had had. So that was one in the plus column. He came out even so far.

"Hello, Tomas," she said neutrally. "You shouldn't take your helmet off in the lock, you know—you should wait until the interior door cycles."

"She's right, Tomas," Moira piped up from the com console. "These Class One digs always get the last pick of equipment. All of it is old, and some of it isn't reliable. Door seals blow all the time."

"It blew last month, when I came in," Tia added helpfully. "It took Mum hours to install the new seal, and she's not altogether happy with it." Tomas's eyes were wide with surprise, and he was clearly taken aback. He had probably intended to ask her where her parents were. He had not expected to be greeted by a lecture on pressure-suit safety.

"Oh," was all he could say. "Ah, thank you. I will remember that in the future."

"You're welcome," she replied. "Mum and Dad are at the dig; I'm sorry they weren't here to meet you."

"I ought to make proper introductions," Moira said from the console. "Tomas, this is Hypatia Cade. Her mother is Doctor Pota Andropolous-Cade and her father is Doctor Braddon Maartens-Cade. Tia, this is Tomas Delacorte-Ibanez."

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Tomas," she replied with careful formality. "Mum and Dad will be here in"—she glanced at her wrist-chrono—ten minutes. In the meantime, there is fresh coffee, and may I offer you anything to eat?"

Once again, he was taken aback. "Coffee, please," he replied after a moment. "If you would be so kind."

She fetched it from the kitchen; by the time she re-

turned with the cup balanced in one hand and the refreshments in the other, he had removed his suit. She had to admit that he did look very handsome in the skin-tight ship-suit he wore beneath it. But then, all of Moira's brawns had been good-looking. That was part of the problem; she tended to pick brawns on the basis of looks first, and personality second.

He accepted the coffee and food from her gravely, and a little warily; for all the world as if he had decided to treat her as some kind of new, unknown sentient. She tried not to giggle.

"That is a very unusual name that you were given," he said, after an awkward pause. "Hypatia, is it?"

"Yes," she said, "I was named for the first and only female librarian of the Great Library at Alexandria on Terra. She was also the last librarian there."

His eyes showed some recognition of the names, at least. So he wasn't completely ignorant of history, the way Julio had been. "Ah. That would that have been when the Romans burned it, in the time of Cleopatra—" he began. She interrupted him with a shake of her head.

"No, the Library wasn't destroyed then, not at all, not even close. It persisted as a famous library into the day of Constantine," she continued, warming to her favorite story, reciting it exactly as Pota had told it to her, as it was written in the History database. "It was when Hypatia was the Librarian that a pack of unwashed Christian fanatics stormed it—led by some people who called themselves prophets and holy men—intending to burn it to the ground because it contained 'pagan books, lies, and heresies.' When Hypatia tried to stop them, she was murdered—stoned to death, then trampled."

"Oh," Tomas said weakly, the wind taken quite out of his sails. He seemed to be searching for something to say, and evidently chose the first thing that sprang to mind. "Why did you call them 'unwashed Christian fanatics'?"

"Because they *were*," she replied impatiently. "They were fanatics, and most of them were stylites and other hermits who made a point of not ever bathing because taking baths was Roman and pagan and not taking baths was Christian and mortifying the flesh." She sniffed. "I suppose it didn't matter to them that it was also giving them fleas and making them smell. I shan't even *mention* the disease!"

"I don't imagine that ever entered their minds," Tomas said carefully.

"Anyway, I think Hypatia was very brave, but she could have been a little smarter," Tia concluded. "I don't think I would have stood there to let them throw stones at me; I would have run away, or locked the door or something."

Tomas smiled unexpectedly; he had a lovely smile, very white teeth in his darkly tanned face. "Well, maybe she didn't have much choice," he said. "I expect that by the time she realized she wasn't going to be able to stop those people, it was too late to get away."

Tia nodded, slowly, considering the ancient Alexandrian garments, how cumbersome they were, and how difficult to run in. "I think you're right," she agreed. "I would hate to think that the Librarian was stupid."

He laughed at that. "You mean you'd hate to think that the great lady you were named for was stupid," he teased. "And I don't blame you. It's much nicer to be named for someone who was brave and heroic on purpose than someone people *think* was a hero just because she was too dense to get out of the way of trouble!"

Tia had to laugh at that, and right then was when she decided that she was going to like Tomas. He hadn't quite known what to make of her at first, but he'd settled down nicely and was treating her quite like an intelligent sentient now.

Evidently Moira had decided the same thing, for when she spoke, her voice sounded much less anxious. "Tomas, aren't you forgetting? You bought Tia her late birthday present."

"I certainly did forget!" he exclaimed. "I do beg your pardon, Tia!"

He handed her the box he had brought, and she controlled herself very well, taking it from him politely, not grabbing like a little child would have. "Thank you, Moira," she said to the com console. "I don't mind that it's late—the kind of like getting my birthday all over again this way."

"You are just too civilized for your own good, dear," Moira giggled. "Well, go ahead, open it!"

She did, carefully undoing the fastenings of the rather plain box and exposing bright-colored wrapping beneath. The wrapped package within was odd-shaped, lumpy—

She couldn't stand it any longer; she tore into the present just like any other child.

"Oh!" she exclaimed when she revealed her prize, for once caught without a word, holding him up to the light.

"Do you like it?" Moira asked anxiously. "I mean, I know you asked, but you grow so fast, I was afraid you'd have outgrown him by now—"

"I *love* him!" Tia exclaimed, hugging the bright blue bear suddenly, reveling in the soft fur against her cheek. "Oh Moira, I just *love* him!"

"Well, it was quite a trick to find him, let me tell you," Moira replied, her voice sounding very relieved, as Tomas grinned even wider. "You people move around so much—I had to find a teddy-bear that would take repeated Decontam procedures, one that would stand up to about anything Quarantine could hand out. And it's hard to *find* bears at all; they seem to have gone right out of style. You don't mind that he's blue?"

"I like blue," she said happily.

"And you like him fuzzy? That was Tomas's idea."

"Thank you, Tomas," she told the brawn, who beamed. "He feels *wonderful*."

"I had a fuzzy dog when I was your age," he replied. "When Moira told me that you wanted a bear like the one she had before she went into her shell, I thought this fellow felt better than the smooth bears."

He leaned down confidentially, and for a moment Tia was afraid that he was going to be patronizing just because she'd gone so enthusiastic over the toy.

"I have to tell you the truth, Tia, I really enjoyed digging into all those toy-shops," he whispered. "A lot of that stuff is wasted on children. I found some logic puz-

zles you just wouldn't believe, and a set of magic tricks I couldn't resist, and I'm afraid I spent far too much money on spaceship models."

She giggled. "I won't tell if you don't," she replied, in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Pota and Braddon are in the airlock," Socrates interrupted. "Shall I order the kitchen to make lunch now?"

"So why exactly *are* you here?" Tomas asked, after all the initial topics of conversation had been exhausted, and the subject turned, inevitably, to Pota and Braddon's work. He gestured at the landscape beyond the viewport; spectacular mountains, many times taller than anything found on Terra or any other inhabited planet. This little ball of rock with a thin skin of dirt was much like the wilder parts of Mars before it had been terraformed, and had a sky so dark at mid-day that the sun shared the sky with the stars. "I wouldn't expect to find much of anything out there for an archeologist—it's the next thing to airless, after all. The scenery is amazing, but that's no reason to stay here—"

Braddon chuckled, the generous mouth in his lantern-jawed face widening in a smile, and Tia hid a grin. Whether or not Tomas knew it, he had just triggered her Dad's lecture-mechanism. Fortunately, Braddon had a gift for lecturing. He was always a popular speaker whenever he could be tempted to go to conferences.

"No one expected to find anything on planets like this one, Tomas," Braddon replied, leaning back against the supporting cushions of the sofa and tucking his hands behind his head. "That's why the Salomon-Kildaire culture is so intriguing. James Salomon and Tory Kildaire discovered the first buildings on the fourth moon of Beta Oranis Three—and there have never been *any* verifiable artifacts uncovered in what you and I would call 'normal' conditions. Virtually every find has been on airless or near-airless bodies. Pota and I have excavated over a dozen sites, doing the Class One studies, and they're all like this one."

Tomas glanced out the viewport again. "Surely that implies that they were—"

"Space-going, yes," Pota supplied, nodding her head so that her gray-brown curls vibrated. "I don't think there's any doubt of it. Although we've never found any trace of whatever it was they used to move them from colony to colony—but that isn't the real mystery."

Braddon gestured agreement. "The real mystery is that they never seem to have set up anything *permanent*. They never seem to have spent more than a few decades in any one place. No one knows why they left, or why they came here in the first place."

Tomas laughed. "They seem to have hopped planets as often as you two," he said. "Perhaps they were simply doing what *you* are doing—excavating an earlier culture, and following it across the stars."

Braddon exclaimed in mock horror. "Please!" he said. "Don't even think that!"

Pota only laughed. "If they had been, we'd have found signs of that," she told both of them, tapping Braddon's knee in playful admonition. "After all, as bleak as these

places are, they preserve things wonderfully. If the EsKays had been archeologists, we'd have found the standard tools of the trade. We break and wear out brushes and digging tools all the time, and just leave them in our discard piles. They would have done the same. No matter how you try to alter it, there are only so many ways you can make a brush or a trowel—"

"There would be bad castings," Tia piped up. "You throw out bad castings all the time, Mum; if they were archeologists, we'd find a pile of bad castings somewhere."

"Bless me, Tia's right," Braddon nodded. "There you are, Tomas: irrefutable proof."

"Good enough for me," Tomas replied goodnaturedly.

"And if that idea was true, there also ought to be signs of the earlier culture, shouldn't there?" Moira asked. "And you've never found anything mixed in with the EsKay artifacts."

"Exactly so," Pota replied, and smiled. "And so, Tomas, you see how easily an archeologist's theories can be disposed of."

"Then I'm going to be thankful to be Moira's partner," Tomas said gracefully, "and leave all the theorizing to better heads than mine."

After a while, the talk turned to the doings of the Institute, and both professional and personal news of Pota and Braddon's friends and rivals. Tia glanced at the clock again; it was a long time past when her parents would have gone back to the dig—they must have decided to take the rest of the day off.

But these weren't subjects that interested her, especially not when the talk went into politics, both of the Institute and the Central Worlds government. She took her bear, politely excused herself, and went back to her room.

She hadn't had a chance to really look him over when Tomas gave him to her. The last time Moira had come to visit, she'd told Tia some stories about what going into the shellperson program had been like, for unlike most shellpersons, she hadn't been popped into her shell until she'd been nearly four. Until that time, there had been some hope that there would have been a palliative for her particular congenital condition—premature aging that had caused her body to resemble a sixty-year-old woman at the age of three. But there was no cure, and at four, her family finally admitted it. Into the shell she went, and since there was *nothing* wrong with her very fine brain, she soon caught up and passed by many of her classmates that had been in their shells since birth.

But one of the toys she'd had—her very favorite, in fact—had been a stuffed teddy-bear. She'd made up adventures for Ivan the Bearable, sending him in a troika across the windswept steppes of Novi Gagarin, and she'd told Tia some of those stories. That, and the *Zen of Pooh* book Moira brought her, had solidified a longing she hadn't anticipated.

For Tia had been entranced by the tales and by Pooh—and had wanted a bear like Moira's. A simple toy that did *nothing*, with no intel-chips; a toy that couldn't talk, or teach, or walk. Something that was just there to be hugged and cuddled; something to listen when she didn't want anything else to overhear. . . .

Moira had promised. Moira didn't forget. Tia closed the door to her room, and paged the AI. "Socrates, would you open a link to Moira in here for me, please?" she asked. Moira would be perfectly capable of following the conversation in the other room, and still talk to her in here too.

"Tia, do you really like your present?" Moira asked anxiously, as soon as the link had been established.

"He's wonderful," Tia answered firmly. "I've even got a name for him. Theodore Edward Bear."

"Or Ted E. Bear for short?" Moira chuckled. "I like it. It fits him. He's such a solemn-faced little fellow. One would think he was a software executive. He looks like a bear with a great deal on his mind."

Tia studied Ted carefully. Moira was right, he was a sober little bear; with a very studious expression, as if he was listening very hard to whatever was being said. His bright blue coloration in no way contradicted the seriousness of his face, nor did the frivolous little red shirt he was wearing with the blue and yellow Courier Service circle-and-lightning-bolt on the front.

"Is there anything going on that I need to know, Moira?" she asked, giving over her careful examination of her new friend and hugging him to her chest instead. "The results of your last batch of tests seems to have satisfied all the Psych people out there that you're a perfectly well-balanced and self-sufficient girl," Moira replied, knowing without Tia prompting her just what was on her mind. "So there's no more talk of making your parents send you to boarding school."

Tia sighed with relief; that had been a very real worry the last time Moira had been here. The ship had left with the results of a battery of tests and psych-profiles that had taken two days to complete.

"I have to tell you that I added to that," Moira said slyly. "I told them what kind of a birthday present you had asked for from me."

"What did they say?" Tia asked anxiously. Had they thought she was being immature—or worse yet, that it meant she harbored some kind of neurosis?

"It was funny, they were questioning me on open com, as if I was some kind of AI that wouldn't respond to anything but a direct question, so of course I could hear everything *they* said. There was silence for a moment, and then the worst of the lot finally blurted out, 'Good heavens, the child is *normal*,' as if he'd expected you to ask for a Singularity simulator or something." Moira chuckled.

"I know who it was, too," Tia said shrewdly. "It was Doctor Phelps-Pittman, wasn't it?"

"Dead on the target, wenchette," Moira replied, still chuckling. "I still don't think he's forgiven you for beating him in Battle Chess. By the way, what *is* your secret?"

"He moves the queen too often," Tia said absently. "I think he likes to watch her hips wiggle when she walks. It's probably something Freudian."

A splutter of static was all that followed that pronouncement, as Moira lost control of the circuit briefly.

"My, my," she replied, when she came back on-line.

"You *are* a little terror. One might almost suspect you of having as much control as a shellperson!"

Tia took that in the spirit it was meant, as a compliment.

"I promise not to tell him *your* weakness," the ship continued, teasingly.

"What's that?" Tia was surprised; she hadn't known she had one.

"You hate to see the pawns sacrificed. I think you feel sorry for the little guys."

Tia digested this in silence for a moment, then nodded reluctant agreement. "I think you're right," she admitted. "It seems as if everybody can beat them up, and it doesn't seem fair."

"You don't have the problem with an ordinary holoboard game," Moira observed casually.

"That's because they're just little blobby pieces on a holoboard game," Tia explained. "In Battle Chess they're little pikemen. And they're cute." She giggled. "I really love it when Pawn takes Knight and he hits the Knight with the butt of his pike right in the—"

"And *that's* why you frighten old Phelps-Pittman," Moira said severely, though Tia could tell she didn't mean it. "He keeps thinking you're going to do the same to him."

"Well, I won't have to see old sour-face for another year and a half," she said comfortably. "Maybe I can figure out how to act like a *normal* girl by then."

"Maybe you can," Moira replied. "I wouldn't put even that past you. Now, how about a game of Battle Chess? Ted Bear can referee."

"Of course," she agreed. "You can use the practice. I'll even spot you a pawn."

"Oh come now! You haven't gotten *that* much better since I saw you last." At Tia's continued silence, the ship asked tentatively, "Have you?"

Tia shrugged. "Check my record with Socrates," she suggested.

There was silence as Moira did just that. Then. "Oh, *decom* it," she said in mock disgust. "You really *are* exasperating. I should demand that you spot me two pawns."

"Not a chance," Tia replied, ordering the AI to set up the game, with a Battle Chess field in front of her. "You're taking advantage enough of a child as it is."

"Taking advantage of a child? Ha!" Moira said ironically. "You're not a child. I'm beginning to agree with Phelps-Pittman. You're an eighty-year-old midget in a little-girl costume."

"Oh, all right," Tia said goodnaturedly. "I won't give you another pawn, but I will let you have white."

"Good." Moira studied the analog of the board in her memory, as Tia studied the holoboard in front of her. "All right, unnatural child. Have at ye!"

Moira and Tomas couldn't stay long; by dinner the ship had lifted, and the pad was empty—and the Cade family was back on schedule.

Pota and Braddon spent the evening catching up with the message-packets Moira had brought them—mostly dispatches from friends at other digs, more scholarly papers in their various fields and the latest in edicts from

the Institute. Since Tia knew, thanks to Moira, that none of those edicts concerned *her*, she was free to watch one of the holos Moira had brought for her entertainment. All carefully screened by the teachers at the Institute, of course, who oversaw the education of every child that was on-site with its parents. But even the teachers didn't see anything wrong with History holos, provided they were properly educational and accurate. The fact that most of these holos had been intended for adult viewing didn't seem to bother them.

Perhaps it was just as well that the Psychs had no idea what she was watching. They would probably have gone into strong hysterics.

Moira had an uncanny ability to pick out the ones that had good scripts and actors—unlike whoever it was that picked out most of the holos for the Remote Educational Department.

This one, a four-part series on Alexander the Great, looked especially good, since it covered only the early parts of his life, before he became a great leader. Tia felt a certain kinship for anyone who'd been labeled "preconscious"; and although she already knew that Alexander's childhood had been far from happy, she was looking forward to viewing this.

Having Ted beside her to whisper comments to make it even more fun.

At the end of the first part, even though she was fascinated, she virtuously told Socrates to shut everything down, and went into the main room to say good-night to her Mum and Dad. The next courier wasn't due for a while, and she wanted to make her treats last as long as possible.

Both of them were so deep in their readers that she had to shake their elbows to get them to realize she was there, but once they came out of their preoccupied daze, they gave her big hugs and kisses, with no sign of annoyance at being interrupted.

"I have a really *good* Mum and Dad," she told Ted before drifting off to sleep. "I really, really do. Not like Alexander. . . ."

The next day, it was back to the usual schedule. Socrates woke her and she got herself cleaned up and dressed, leaving Ted to reside on the carefully made bed until she returned. When she entered the main room, Pota and Braddon were already there, blinking sleepily over steaming cups of coffee.

"Hello, darling," Pota greeted her as she fetched her milk and cereal from the kitchen. "Did you enjoy Alexander?"

"We-ell, it was *interesting*," Tia said truthfully. "And I liked the actors and the story. The costumes and the horses were really stellar! But his mother and father were kind of . . . odd . . . weren't they?"

Braddon looked up from his coffee with his curly dark hair over one brown eye and gave his daughter a wry grin. "They were certifiable crazy-cases by our standards, pumpkin," he replied. "But after all, there wasn't anyone around to apply those standards back then."

"And no Board of Mental Health to enforce them,"

Pota added, her thin, delicate face creasing with a puckish smile. "Remember, oh curious little chick, they were *not* the ones that had the most influence on Alexander. That was left to his tutors and nurses. I think he succeeded in spite of his parents, personally, and not because of them."

Tia nodded sagely. "Can I come help at the dig today?" she asked eagerly. This was one of the best things about the fact that her parents had picked the EsKays to specialize in. With next to no atmosphere, there were no indigent life-forms to worry about. By the time Tia was five, she had pressure-suit protocol down pat, and there was no reason why she couldn't come to the digs, or even wander about within specified limits on her own. "The biggest sandbox in the universe," Braddon called it; so long as she stayed within eye- and earshot, neither of them minded having her about outside.

"Not today, dearest," Pota said apologetically. "We've found some glassware, and we're making holos. As soon as we're done with that, we'll make the castings, and after that you can come run errands for us." In the thin atmosphere and chill of the site, castings were tricky to make; one reason why Pota discarded so many. But no artifact could be moved without first making a good casting of it, as well as holos from all possible angles—too many times the artifacts crumbled to nothing, despite the most careful handling, once they were moved.

She sighed; holos and castings meant she couldn't even come near the site, lest the vibrations she made walking interfere. "All right," she agreed. "Can I go outside, though? As long as I stay close to the airlock?"

"Stay close to the lock and keep the emergency cart nearby, and I don't see any reason why you can't play outside," Pota said after a moment. Then she smiled. "And how is your dig coming?"

"You mean really, or for pretend?" she asked.

"Pretend, of course," said Braddon. "Pretend is always more fun than really. That's why we became archeologists in the first place—because we get to play pretend for months at a time until we have to be serious and write papers!"

He gave her a conspiratorial grin, and she giggled.

"We-ell," she said, and drew her face down into a frown *just* like Doctor Heinz Marius-Llewellyn, when he was about to put everyone to sleep. "I've found the village site of a race of flint-using primitives who were used as slave labor by the EsKays at *your* site."

"Have you!" Pota fell right in with the pretense, as Braddon nodded seriously. "Well that certainly explains why we haven't found any servos. They must have used slaves to do all their manual labor!"

"Yes. And the Flint People worshipped them as gods from the sky," Tia continued. "That was why they didn't revolt; all the slave labor was a form of worship. They'd go back to their village and then they'd try to make flint tools just like the things that the sky-gods used. They probably made pottery things too, but I haven't found anything but shards."

"Well, pottery doesn't hold up well in conditions like this," Pota agreed. "It goes brittle very quickly under the

extremes of surface temperature. What have you got so far?"

"A flint disruptor-pistol, a flint wrist-com, a flint flashlight, and some more things," she said solemnly. "I haven't found any arrowheads or spear-points or things like that, but that's because there's nothing to hunt here. They were vegetarians, and they ate nothing but lichen."

Braddon made a face. "Awful. Worse than the food at the Institute Cafeteria! No wonder they didn't survive—the food probably bored them to death!"

Pota rose and gathered up their plates and cups, stowing them neatly in the dishwasher. "Well, enjoy your lessons, pumpkin. We'll see you at lunch."

She smiled, hugged them both good-bye before they suited up, then went off to the schoolroom.

That afternoon, once lessons were done, she took down her own pressure-suit from the rack beside the airlock inner door. Her suit was designed a little differently from her parents', with accordion-folds at wrists and elbow, ankles and knees, and at the waist, to allow for the growth spurts of a child. This was a brand-new suit, for she had been about to outgrow the last one just before they went out on this dig. She liked it a lot better than the old one; the manufacturer of the last one had some kind of stupid idea that a child's suit should have cavorting flowers with smiling faces all over it. She had been ashamed to have anyone but her parents see her in the awful thing. She thought it made her look like a little clown.

It had come second-hand from a child on a Class Three dig—like most of the things that the Cades got. Evaluation digs simply didn't have that high a priority when it came to getting anything other than the bare essentials. But Tia had had the bright idea when her birthday came around to ask her parents' superiors at the Institute for a new pressure-suit. And when it came out that she was imitating her parents, by creating her own little dig-site, she had so tickled them that they actually sent her one. Brand-new, good for three or four years at least, and the *only* difference between it and a grownup suit was that hers had extra helmet-lights and a com that couldn't be turned off, a locator-beacon that was always on, and bright fluorescent stripes on the helmet and down the arms and legs. A small price to pay for dignity.

The flowered suit had gone back to the Institute, to be endured by some other unfortunate child.

And the price to be paid for her relative freedom to roam was waiting in the airlock. A wagon, child-sized and modified from the pull-wagon many children had as toys—but this one had powered crawler-tracks and was loaded with an auxiliary power unit and air-pack and full face-mask. If her suit failed, she had been drilled in what to do so many times she could easily have saved herself when asleep. *One*, take a deep breath and pop the helmet. *Two*, pull the mask on, making sure seals around her face were secure. *Three*, turn on the air and *Four*, plug into the APU, which would keep the suit heat up with the helmet off. Then walk—slowly, carefully, to the airlock, towing the wagon behind. There was

no reason why she should suffer anything worse than a bit of frostbite.

It had never happened. That didn't mean it wouldn't. Tia had no intention of becoming a tragic tale in the newbytes. Tragic tales were all very well in drama and history, but they were not what one wanted in real life.

So the wagon went with her, inconvenient as it was.

The filters in this suit were good ones; the last suit had always smelled a little musty, but the air in this one was fresh and clean. She trotted over the uneven surface, towing the cart behind, kicking up little puffs of dust and sand. Everything out here was very sharp-edged and clear; red and yellow desert, reddish-purple mountains, dark blue sky. The sun, Sigma Marinara, hung right above her head, so all the shadows were tiny pools of dark black at the bases of things. She hadn't been out to her "site" for several weeks, not since the last time Mum and Dad had asked her to stay away. That had been right at the beginning, when they first got here and uncovered enough to prove it was an EsKay site. Since that time there had been a couple of sandstorms, and Tia was a bit apprehensive that her "dig" had gotten buried. Unlike her parents' dig, *hers* did not have force-shields protecting her trench from storms.

But when she reached her site, she discovered to her amazement that *more* was uncovered than she had left. Instead of burying her dig in sand, the storm had scoured the area clean—

There were several likely-looking lumps at the farther end of the trench, all fused together into a bumpy whole. Wonderful! There would be hours of potential pretend here; freeing the lumps from the sandy matrix, cleaning them off, figuring out what the Flint People had been trying to copy. . . .

She took the tools her parents had discarded out of the wagon—the broken trowel that Braddon had mended for her, the worn brushes, the blunted probes—and set to work.

Several hours later, she sat back on her heels and looked at her first find, frowning. This wasn't a lump of flint after all. In fact, it seemed to be some kind of layered substance, with the layers fused together. Odd, it looked kind of wadded up. It certainly wasn't any kind of layered rock she'd ever seen before, and it didn't match any of the rocks she'd uncovered until now.

She chewed her lower lip in thought and stared at it, letting her mind just drift, to see if it could identify what kind of rock it was. It didn't look sedimentary.

Actually, it didn't look much like a rock at all. . . .

Not like a rock. What if it isn't a rock?

She blinked, and suddenly knew what it did look like. Layers of thin cloth or paper, wadded up, then discarded.

Finagle! Have I—

She gently—very gently—pried another lump off the outcropping, and carefully freed it of its gritty coating. And there was no doubt this time that what she had was the work of intelligent hands. Under the layer of half-fused sand and flaking, powdery dust gleamed a spot of

white porcelain, with the matte edge of a break showing why it had been discarded.

Oh, decom—I found the garbage dump!

Or, at least, she had found a little trash heap. That was *probably* it; likely there was just this lump of discards and no more. But anything the EsKays left behind was important, and it was equally important to stop digging *now*, mark the site in case another sandstorm came up and capriciously buried it as it had capriciously uncovered it, and bring some evidence to show Mum and Dad what she had found.

Except that she didn't have a holocamera. Or anything to cast with.

Finally she gave up trying to think of what to do. There was only one thing for it. Bring her two finds inside and show them. The lump of fabric might not survive the touch of real air, but the porcelain thing surely would. Porcelain, unlike glass, was more resilient to the stresses of repeated temperature changes and was not likely to go to powder at the first touch of air.

She went back inside the dome and rummaged around for a bit before returning with a plastic food-container for the artifacts, and a length of plastic pipe and the plastic tail from a kite-kit she'd never had a chance to use. Another well-meaning, but stupid, gift from someone Dad worked with; someone who never once thought that on a Mars-type world there weren't very many opportunities to fly kites. . . .

With the site marked as securely as she could manage, and the two artifacts sealed into the plastic tub, she returned to the dome again, waiting impatiently for her parents to get back.

She had hoped that the seal on the plastic tub would be good enough to keep the artifacts safely protected from the air of the dome. She knew as soon as the air-lock pressurized, though, that her attempt to keep them safe had failed. Even before she pulled off her helmet, the external suit-mike picked up the *biss* of air leaking into the container. And when she held the plastic tub up to the light, it was easy enough to see that one of the lumps had begun to disintegrate. She pried the lid off for a quick peek, and sneezed at the dust. The wadded lump was not going to look like much when her parents got home.

Decom it, she thought resentfully. That's not fair!

She put it down carefully on the countertop; if she didn't jar it, there might still be enough left when Mum and Dad got back in that they would at least be able to tell what it *had* been.

She stripped out of her suit and sat down to wait. She tried to read a book, but she just couldn't get interested. Mum and Dad were going to be so surprised—and even better, now the Psychs at the Institute would have no reason to keep her away from the Class Two sites anymore—because *this* would surely prove that she knew what to do when she accidentally found something. The numbers on the clock moved with agonizing slowness, as she waited for the moment when they would finally return.

The sky outside the viewport couldn't get much dark-

er, but the shadows lengthened, and the light faded. Soon now, soon—

Finally she heard them in the outer lock, and her heart began to beat faster. Suddenly she was no longer so certain that she had done the right thing. What if they were angry that she dissected the first two artifacts? What if she had done the wrong thing in moving them?

The "what ifs" piled up in her head as she waited for the lock to cycle.

Finally the inner door hissed, and Braddon and Pota came through, already pulling off their helmets and continuing a high-speed conversation that must have begun back at the dig.

"—but the matrix is all wrong for it to be a food-preparation area—"

"Yes, yes," Pota replied impatiently, "but what about the integument—"

"Mum!" Tia said, running up to them and tugging at her mother's elbow. "I've found something!"

"Hello, pumpkin, that's very nice," her mother replied absently, hugging her, and going right on with her conversation. Her intense expression showed that she was thinking while she spoke, and her eyes never wandered from her husband's face—and as for Braddon, the rest of the world simply did not exist.

"Mum!" Tia persisted. "I've found an artifact!"

"In a moment, dear," Pota replied. "But what about—"

"MUM!" Tia shouted, disobeying *every* rule of not interrupting grownups in desperation, knowing from all the signs that she would *never* get their attention otherwise. Conversations like *this* one could go on for hours. "*I've found an artifact!*"

Both her parents stopped their argument in mid-sentence, and stared at her. Silence enveloped the room; an ominous silence. Tia gulped nervously.

"Tia," Braddon finally said, disapproval creeping into his voice, "your mother and I are in the middle of a very important conversation. This is *not* the time for pretend."

"Dad, it's *not* pretend!" she said insistently, pointing to her plastic box. "It's *not*! I found an artifact, and there's more—"

Pota raised an eyebrow at her husband and shrugged. Braddon picked up the box, carelessly, and Tia winced as the first lump inside visibly disintegrated more.

"I am going to respect your intelligence and integrity enough to assume that you *think* you found an artifact," Braddon replied, prying the lid from the container. "But Tia, you know better than to—"

He glanced down inside—and his eyebrows arched upward in the greatest show of surprise that Tia had ever seen him make.

"I *told* you," Tia could not resist saying, triumphantly.

"—so they took the big lights out to the trench, and the extra field-generators," she told Ted E. Bear after she'd been put to bed for the night. "They were out there for *hours*, and they let me wait up to hear what it was. And it *was*, I *did* find a garbage dump! A big one, too! Mum made a special call to the Institute, 'cause this is the first really big EsKay dump anybody's ever found."

She hugged Ted closer, basking in the warmth of Pota's praise, a warmth that still lingered and made her feel happy right down to her toes. "You did everything *exactly* right with the equipment you had," Pota had told her. "I've had undergraduates that didn't do as well as you did, pumpkin! You remember what I told you, when you asked me about why I wanted to find garbage?"

"That we learn more from sentiments' garbage than from anything other than their literature," she'd recited dutifully.

"Well," Pota had replied, sitting on the edge of her bed and touching her nose with one finger, playfully. "You, my curious little chick, have just upgraded this site from a Class One to a Class Three with four hours of work! That's more than Braddon and I have *ever* done!"

"Does that mean that we'll be leaving?" she'd asked in confusion.

"Eventually," Pota told her, a certain gloating glee in her voice. "But it takes time to put together a Class Three team, and *we* happen to be right here. Your father and I will be making gigabytes of important discoveries before the team gets here to replace us. And with that much already invested—they may *not* replace us!"

Tia had shaken her head, confused.

Pota had hugged her. "What I mean, pumpkin, is that there is a *very* good chance that we'll stay on here—as the dig supervisors! An instant promotion from Class One supervisor to Class Three supervisor! There'll be better equipment, a better dome to live in—you'll have some playmates—couriers will be by every week instead of every few months—not to mention the raises in pay and status! All the papers on this site will go out under *our* names! And all because *you* were my clever, bright, careful little girl, who knew what she saw and knew when to stop playing!"

"Mum and Dad are really, really happy," she told Ted, thinking about the glow of joy that had been on both their faces when they finished the expensive link to the nearest Institute supervisor. "I think we did a good thing. I think maybe you brought us luck, Ted." She yawned. "Except about the other kids coming. But we don't have to play with them if we don't want to, do we?"

Ted agreed silently, and she hugged him again. "I'd rather talk to you, anyway," she told him. "You never say anything dumb. Dad says that if you can't say something intelligent, you shouldn't say anything; and Mum says that people who know when to shut up are the smartest people of all, so I guess you must be pretty smart. Right?"

But she never got a chance to find out if Ted agreed with that statement, because at that point she fell right asleep.

Over the course of the next few days, it became evident that this was not just an ordinary garbage dump; this was one containing scientific or medical debris. That raised the status of the site from "important" to "priceless," and Pota and Braddon took to spending every waking moment either at the site or preserving and examining their finds, making copious notes, and any number of specu-

lations. They hardly ever saw Tia anymore; they had changed their schedule so that they were awake long before she was, and came in long after she went to bed.

Pota apologized—via a holo that she had left to play for Tia as soon as she came in to breakfast this morning.

"Pumpkin," her image said, while Tia sipped her juice. "I hope you can understand why we're doing this. The more we find out before the team gets sent out, the more we make ourselves essential to the dig, the better our chances for that promotion." Pota's image ran a hand through her hair; to Tia's critical eyes, she looked very tired, and a bit frazzled, but fairly satisfied. "It won't be more than a few weeks, I promise. Then things will go back to normal. Better than normal, in fact, I promise that we'll have a Family Day before the team gets here, all right? So start thinking what you'd like to do."

Well, *that* would be stellar! Tia knew exactly what she wanted to do—she wanted to go out to the mountains on the big sled, and she wanted to drive it herself on the way.

"So forgive us, all right? We don't love you any less, and we think about you all the time, and we miss you like anything." Pota blew a kiss toward the camera. "I know you can take care of yourself; in fact, we're counting on that. You're making a big difference to us. I want you to know that. Love you, baby."

Tia finished her juice as the holo flickered out, and a certain temptation raised its head. This could be a really unique opportunity to play hooky, just a little bit. Mum and Dad were not going to be checking the tutor to see how her lessons were going—and the Institute Psychs wouldn't care; they thought she was too advanced for her age anyway. She could even raid the library for the holos she wasn't precisely supposed to watch. . . .

"Oh, Finagle," she said, regretfully, after a moment. It might be fun—but it would be *guilty* fun. And besides, sooner or later Mum and Dad would find out what she'd done, and *ping!* there would go the Family Day and probably a lot of other privileges. She weighed the immediate-pleasure of being lazy and watching forbidden holos against the future-pleasure of being able to pilot the sled up the mountains, and the latter outranked the former. Piloting the sled was the closest *she* would get to piloting a ship, and she wouldn't be able to do that for years and years and years yet.

And if she fell on her nose *now*, right when Mum and Dad trusted her most—they'd probably restrict her to the dome for ever and ever.

"Not worth it," she sighed, jumping down from her stool. She frowned as she noticed that the pins-and-needles feeling in her toes still hadn't gone away. It had been there when she woke up this morning. It had been there yesterday too, and the day before, but by breakfast it had worn off.

Well, it didn't bother her that much, and it wouldn't take her mind off her Latin lesson. Too bad, too.

"Boring language," she muttered. "*ick, ack, ickle!*"

Well, the sooner she got it over with, the better off she would be, and she could go back to nice logical quadratics.

* * *

The pins-and-needles feeling hadn't worn off by afternoon, and although she felt all right, she decided that since Mum and Dad were trusting her to do everything right, she probably ought to talk to the AI about it.

"Socrates, engage Medic-Mode, please," she said, sitting down reluctantly in the tiny medic station. She *really* didn't like being in the medic station; it smelled of disinfectant and felt like being in a too-small pressure suit. It was just about the size of a tiny lav, but something about it made it *feel* smaller. Maybe because it was dark inside. And of course, since it had been made for adults, the proportions were all wrong for her. In order to reach hand-plates she had to scoot to the edge of the seat, and in order to reach foot-plates she had to get right up the seat entirely. The screen in front of her lit up with the smiling holo of someone that was supposed to be a doctor. Privately, she doubted that the original had ever been any closer to medicine than wearing the jumpsuit. He just looked too—polished. *Too* trustworthy, *too* handsome, *too* competent. Any time there was anything official she had to interface with that seemed to scream *trust me* at her, she immediately distrusted it, and went very wary. Probably the original for this holo had been an actor. Maybe he made adults feel calm, but he made her think about the Psychs and their too-hearty greetings, their nosy questions.

"Well, Tia," said the AI's voice—changed, to that of the "doctor." "What brings you here?"

"My toes feel like they're asleep," she said dutifully. "They kind of tingle."

"Is that all?" the "doctor" asked, after a moment for the AI to access his library of symptoms. "Are they colder than normal? Put your hand on the hand-plate, and your foot on the foot-plate, Tia."

She obeyed, feeling very like a contortionist.

"Well, the circulation seems to be fine," the "doctor" said after the AI had a chance to read temperature and blood pressure, both of which appeared in the upper right-hand corner of the screen. "Have you any other symptoms?"

"No," she replied. "Not really." The "doctor" froze for a moment, as the AI analyzed all the other readings it had taken from her during the past few days—what she'd eaten and how much, what she'd done, her sleep patterns.

The "doctor" unfroze. "Sometimes when children start growing very fast, they get odd sensations in their bodies," the AI said. "A long time ago, those were called 'growing pains.' Now we know it's because sometimes different kinds of tissue grow at different rates. I think that's probably what your problem is, Tia, and I don't think you need to worry about it. I'll prescribe some vitamin supplements for you, and in a few days you should be just fine."

"Thank you," she said politely, and made her escape, relieved to have gotten off so lightly.

And in a few days, the pins-and-needles sensation *did* go away, and she thought no more about it. Thought no

more, that is, until she went outside to her new "dig," and did something she hadn't done in a year—she fell down. Well, she didn't exactly fall; she *thought* she'd sidestepped a big rock, but she hadn't. She rammed her toes right into it, and went heavily to her knees.

The suit was intact, she discovered to her relief—and she was quite ready to get up and keep going, until she realized that her foot didn't hurt.

And it should have, if she'd rammed it against the outcropping hard enough to throw her to the ground.

So instead of going on, she went back to the dome and peeled off suit and shoe and sock—and found her foot was completely numb, but black and blue where she had slammed it into the unyielding stone.

When she prodded it experimentally, she discovered that her whole foot was numb, from the toes back to the arch. She peeled off her other shoe and sock, and found that her left foot was as numb as her right.

"Decom it," she muttered. This surely meant another check-in with the medic.

Once again she climbed into the claustrophobic little closet at the back of the dome and called up the "doctor."

"Still got pins-and-needles, Tia?" he said cheerfully, as she wriggled on the hard seat.

"No," she replied, "But I've mashed my foot something awful. It's all black and blue."

"Put it on the foot-plate, and I'll scan it," the "doctor" replied. "I promise, it won't hurt a bit."

Of course it won't; it doesn't hurt now, she thought resentfully, but did as she was told.

"Well, no bones broken, but you certainly did bruise it," the "doctor" said after a moment. Then he added archly, "What were you doing, kicking the tutor?"

"No," she muttered. She really *hated* it when the AI program made it get patronizing. "I stubbed it on a rock, outside."

"Does it hurt?" the "doctor" continued, oblivious to her resentment.

"No," she said shortly. "It's all numb."

"Well, if it does, I've authorized your bathroom to give you some pills," the "doctor" said with cloying cheer. "Just go right ahead and take them if you need them—you know how to get them."

The screen shut down before she had a chance to say anything else. *I guess it isn't anything to worry about*, she decided. *The AI would have said something otherwise. It'll probably go away.*

But it didn't go away, although the bruises healed. Before long she had other bruises, and the numbness of her feet extended to her ankles. But she told herself that the AI had said it would go away, eventually—and anyway, this wasn't so bad; at least when she mashed herself it didn't hurt.

She continued to play at her own little excavation—which she had decided was a grave-site. The primitives burned their dead though, and only buried the ashes with their flint-replicas of the sky-gods' wonderful things—hoping that the dearly departed would be reincarnated as sky gods and return in wealth and triumph. . . .

It wasn't as much fun, though, without Mum and Dad to talk to; and she was getting kind of tired of the way she kept tripping and falling over the uneven ground at the new "site." She hadn't damaged her new suit yet, but there were sharp rocks that could rip holes even in the tough suit fabric—and if her suit was torn, there would go the promised Family Day.

So, finally, she gave up on it, and spent her afternoons inside.

A few nights later, Pota peeked in her room to see if she was still awake.

"I wanted you to know we were still flesh-and-blood and not holos, pumpkin," her Mum said, sitting down on the side of her bed. "How are your excavations coming?"

Tia shook her head. "I kept tripping on things, and I didn't want to tear my suit," she explained. "I think that the Flint People must have put a curse on their gravesite. I don't think I should dig there anymore."

Pota chuckled, hugged her, and said, "That could very well be, dear. It never pays to underestimate the power of religion. When the others arrive we'll research their religion and take the curse off, all right?"

"Okay," she replied. She wondered for a moment if she should mention her feet—

But Pota kissed her and whisked out the door before she could make up her mind.

Nothing more happened for several days, and she got used to having numb feet. If she was careful to watch where she stepped, and never went barefoot, there really wasn't anything to worry about. And the AI had said it was something that happened to other children.

Besides, now Mum and Dad were *really* finding important things. In a quick breakfast-holo, a tired but excited Braddon said that what they were uncovering now might mean a whole lot more than just a promotion. It might mean the establishment of a field-wide reputation.

Just what that meant, exactly, Tia wasn't certain—but there was no doubt that it must be important or Braddon wouldn't have been so excited about it. So she decided that whatever was wrong with her could wait. It wouldn't be long now, and once Mum and Dad weren't involved in this day-and-night frenzy of activity, she could explain everything and they would see to it that the medics gave her the right shot or whatever it was that she needed.

The next morning when she woke up, her fingers were tingling.

Tia sighed, and took her place inside the medic booth. This was getting very tiresome.

The AI ran her through the standard questions, which she answered as she had before. "So now you have that same tingling in your hands as you did in your feet, is that right?" the "doctor" asked.

"That's right," she said shortly.

"The same tingling that went away?" the "doctor" persisted.

"Yes," she replied. *Should I say something about how it doesn't tingle anymore, about how now it's numb?* But the AI was continuing.

"Tia, I can't really find anything wrong with you," it said. "Your circulation is fine, you don't have a fever, your appetite and weight are fine, you're sleeping right. But you *do* seem to have gotten very accident-prone lately." The "doctor" took on a look of concern covering impatience. "Tia, I know that your parents are very busy right now, and they don't have time to talk to you or play with you. Is *that* what's really wrong? Are you angry with your parents for leaving you alone so much? Would you like to talk to a counselor?"

"No!" she snapped. The idea! The *stupid* AI actually thought she was making this up to get attention!

"Well, you simply don't have any other symptoms," the "doctor" said, not too gently. "This hasn't got to the point where I'd have to insist that you talk to a counselor, but really, without anything else to go on, I can't suggest anything else except that this is a phase you'll grow out of."

"This hasn't got to the point where I'd have to insist that you talk to a counselor." Those were dangerous words. The AI's "counselor" mode was only good for so much—and every single thing she said and did would be recorded the moment that she started "counseling." Then all the Psychs back at the Institute would be sent the tapes via compressed-mode databurst—and they'd be all over them, looking for something wrong with her that needed Psyching. And if they found anything, anything at all, Mum and Dad would get orders from the Board of Mental Health that they couldn't ignore, and she'd be shipped back to a school on the next courier-run.

Oh, no. You don't catch me that easy.

"You're right," she said carefully. "But Mum and Dad trust me to tell you *everything* that's wrong, so I am."

"All right, then." The "doctor's" face lost that stern look. "So long as you're just being conscientious. Keep taking those vitamin supplements, Tia, and everything will be fine."

But everything wasn't fine. Within days, the tingling had stopped, to be replaced by numbness. Just like her feet. She began having trouble holding things, and her lessons took twice as long now, since she couldn't touch-type anymore and had to watch where her fingers went.

She completely gave up on doing anything that required a lot of manual dexterity. Instead, she watched a lot of holos, even boring ones, and played a great deal of holochess. She read a lot too, from the screen, so that she could give one-key page-turning commands rather than trying to turn paper pages herself. The numbness stopped at her wrists, and for a few days she was so busy getting used to doing things without feeling her hands, that she didn't notice that the numbness in her legs had spread from her ankles to her knees. . . .

Now she was afraid to go to the AI "doctor" program, knowing that it would put her in for counseling. She tried looking things up herself in the database, but knew that she was going to have to be very sneaky to avoid triggering flags in the AI. As the numbness stopped at the knees, then began to spread up her arms, she kept telling herself that it wouldn't, couldn't be much longer

now. Soon Mum and Dad would be done, and they would know she wasn't making this up to get attention. Soon she would be able to tell them herself, and they'd make the stupid medic work right. Soon.

She woke up, as usual, to hands and feet that acted like wooden blocks at the ends of her limbs. She got a shower—easy enough, since the controls were push-button, then struggled into her clothing by wriggling and using teeth and fingers that didn't really want to move. She didn't bother too much with hair and teeth; it was just too hard. Shoving her feet into slippers, since she hadn't been able to tie her shoes for the past couple of days, she stumped out into the main room of the dome—

Only to find Pota and Braddon waiting there for her, smiling over their coffee.

"Surprise!" Pota said cheerfully. "We've done just about everything we can on our own, and we zipped the findings off to the Institute last night. *Now* things can get back to normal!"

"Oh, *Mum!*" She couldn't help herself; she was so overwhelmed by relief and joy that she started to run across the room to fling herself into their arms—

Started to. Halfway there, she tripped, as usual, and went flying through the air, crashing into the table and spilling the hot coffee all over her arms and legs.

They picked her up as she babbled apologies about her clumsiness. She didn't even notice what the coffee had done to her, didn't even think about it until her parents' expressions of horror alerted her to the fact that there were burns and blisters already rising on her lower arms.

"It doesn't hurt," she said, dazedly, without thinking, just saying the first thing that came into her mind. "It's okay, really, I've been kind of numb for a while so it doesn't hurt, honest—"

Pota and Braddon both froze. Something about their expressions startled her into silence.

"You don't feel anything?" Pota said, carefully. "No pain, nothing at all?"

She shook her head. "My hands and feet were tingling for a while and then they stopped and went numb. I thought if I just waited you could take care of it when you weren't so busy—"

They wouldn't let her say anything else. Within moments they had established through careful prodding and tests with the end of a sharp probe that the numb area now ended at mid-thigh and mid-shoulder.

"How long has this been going on?" Braddon asked, while Pota flew to the AI console to call up the medical program the adults used.

"Oh, a few weeks," she said vaguely. "Socrates said it wasn't anything, that I'd grow out of it. *Then* he acted like I was making it up, and I didn't want him to get the Psychs on me. So I figured I would . . ."

Pota returned at that moment, her mouth set in a grim line. "You are going straight to bed, pumpkin," she said, with what Tia could tell was forced lightness. "Socrates thinks you have pinched nerves; possibly a spinal defect that he can't scan for. So you are going to bed, and we are calling for a courier to come get you. All right?"

Braddon and Pota exchanged one of those looks, the kind Tia couldn't read, and Tia's heart sank. "Okay," she sighed with resignation. "I didn't mean to be such a bother, honest, I didn't—"

Braddon scooped her up in his arms and carried her off to her room. "Don't even *think* that you're being a bother," he said fiercely. "We love you, pumpkin. And we're going to see that you get better as quickly as we can."

He tucked her into bed, with Ted beside her, and called up a holo from the almost-forbidden collection. "Here," he said, kissing her tenderly. "Your Mum is going to be in here in a minute to put something on those burns. Then we're going to spend all our time making you the most disgustingly spoiled little brat in known space! What you have to do is lie there and think really hard about getting better. Is it a deal?"

"Sure, Dad," she replied, managing to find a grin for him somewhere. "It's a deal."

Because Tia was in no danger of dying—and because there was no craft available to come fetch her capable of Singularity Drive—the AI-drone that had been sent to take her to a Central Worlds hospital took two more weeks to arrive. Two more long, interminable weeks, during which the faces of her Mum and Dad grew drawn and frightened—and in which her condition not only did not improve, it deteriorated.

By the end of that two weeks, she was in much worse shape; she had not only lost all feeling in her limbs, she had lost use of them as well. The clumsiness that had begun when she had trouble with buttons and zippers had turned into paralysis. If she hadn't felt the need to keep her parents' spirits up, she would have cried. She couldn't even hold Ted anymore.

She joked about it to her Mum, pretending that she had always wanted to be waited on hand-and-foot. She *bad* to joke about it; although she was terrified, the look of fear in her parent's eyes drove her own terrors away. She was determined, absolutely determined, not to let them know how frightened she was. They were already scared enough; if she lost her courage, they might panic.

The time crawled by, as she watched holo after holo and played endless games of chess against Braddon, and kept telling herself that once she got to the hospital, everything would be fine. Of course it would be fine. There wasn't anything that a Central Worlds hospital couldn't cure. Everyone knew that! Only congenital defects couldn't be cured. But she had been fine, right up until the day this started. It was probably something stupid.

"Socrates says it has to be pinched nerves," Pota repeated, for the hundredth time, the day the ship was due. "Once they get you to the hospital, you'll have to be really brave, pumpkin. They're probably going to have to operate on you, and it's probably going to take several months before you're back to normal—"

She brushed Tia's hair and tied it in back in a neat tail, the way Tia liked it. "I won't be able to do any lessons, then, will I?" she asked, mostly to keep her mother's mind busy with something trivial. *Mum doesn't handle*

reality and real-time very well . . . Dad doesn't either. "They're probably going to have me in a cast or something, and all dopey with pain-pills. I'm going to fall behind, aren't I?"

"Well," Pota said with false cheer, "yes, I'm afraid so. But that will probably make the Psychs all very happy; you know, they think that you're too far ahead as it is. But just think—you'll have the whole Library at the hospital to dig into any time you want it!"

That was enough even to divert her for a minute. The entire Library at the hospital—magnitudes bigger than any Library they could carry with them. All the holos she wanted to watch—and proper reading screens set up, instead of the jury-rig Dad had put together—

"They're here," Braddon called from the outer room. Pota compressed her lips into a line again, and lifted Tia out of the bed. And for the first time in weeks, Tia was bundled into her pressure-suit, put inside as if Pota was dressing a giant doll. Braddon came in to help in a moment, as she tried to cooperate as much as she could. She would be going outside again. This time, though, she probably wouldn't be coming back. Not to this dome, anyway.

"Wait!" she called, just before Pota sealed her in. "Wait, I want my bear!" And at the look of doubt her parents exchanged, she put on the most pleading expression she could manage. "Please?" She couldn't stand the idea that she'd be going off to a strange place with nothing familiar or warm in it. Even if she couldn't hold him, she could still talk to him, and feel his fur against her cheek. "Please?"

"All right, pumpkin," Pota said, relenting. "I think there's just room for him in there with you." Fortunately Ted was very squashable. There *was* room for him in the body of the suit, and Tia took comfort in the feel of his warm little bulk against her waist.

She didn't have any time to think of anything else—for at that moment, two strangers dressed in the white pressure-suits of CenCom Medical came in. There was a strange hiss at the back of her air-pack, and the room went away.

She woke again in a strange white room, dressed in a white paper gown. The only spot of color in the whole place was Ted. *He* was propped beside her, in the crook of her arm, his head peeking out from beneath the white blanket.

She blinked, trying to orient herself, and the cold hand of fear clamped down on her throat. Where was she? A hospital room, probably, but where were Mum and Dad? How did she get here so *fast*? What had those two strangers done to her?

And why wasn't she feeling better? Why couldn't she feel anything?

"She's awake," said a voice she didn't recognize. She turned her head, which was all she could move, to see someone in another white pressure-suit standing beside her, anonymous behind a dark face-plate. The red cross of Medical was on one shoulder, and there was a name-tag over the breast, but she couldn't read it from this an-

gle. She couldn't even tell if the person in the suit was male or female, or even human or humanoid.

The face-plate bent over her; she would have shrunk away if she could, feeling scared in spite of herself—the plate was so blank, so impersonal. But then she realized that the person in the suit had bent down so that she could see the face inside, past the glare of lights on the plexi surface, and she relaxed a little.

"Hello, Hypatia," said the person—a lady, actually, a very nice lady from her face. Her voice sounded kind of tinny, coming through the suit speaker; a little like Moira's over the ancient com. The comparison made her feel a little calmer. At least the lady knew her name, and pronounced it right.

"Hello," she said cautiously. "This is the hospital, isn't it? How come I don't remember the ship?"

"Well, Hypatia—may I call you Tia?" At Tia's nod, the lady continued. "Tia, our first thought was that you might have some kind of Plague, even though your parents were all right. The doctor and medic we sent on the ship decided that it was better to be completely safe, and keep you and your parents in isolation. The easiest way to do that was to put all three of you in Cold Sleep and keep you in your suits until we got you here. We didn't want to frighten you, so we asked your parents not to tell you what we were going to do."

Tia digested that. "All right," she said, trying to be agreeable, since there wasn't anything she could have done about it anyway. "It probably would have gotten really boring on the ship. There probably wasn't much to watch or read, and they would have gotten tired of playing chess with me."

The lady laughed. "Given that you would have beaten the pants off both of them, quite probably," she agreed, straightening up a little. Now that Tia knew there was a person behind the face-plate, it didn't seem quite so threatening. "Now, we're going to keep you in isolation for a while longer, while we see what it is that bit you. You'll be seeing a lot of me—I'm one of our two doctors. My name is Anna Jorgenson-Kepal, and you can call me Anna, or Doctor Anna if you like, but I don't think we need to be that formal. Your other doctor is Kennet Uhua-Sorg. You *won't* be seeing much of him until you're out of isolation, because he's a paraplegic and he's in a Moto-Chair. Can't fit one of *them* into a pressure-suit."

The holoscreen above the bed flickered into life, and the head and shoulders of a thin, ascetic-looking young man appeared there. "Call me Kenny, Tia," the young man said. "I absolutely refuse to be stuffy with you. I'm sorry I can't meet you in person, but it takes *forever* to decontam one of these fardling chairs, so Anna gets to be my hands."

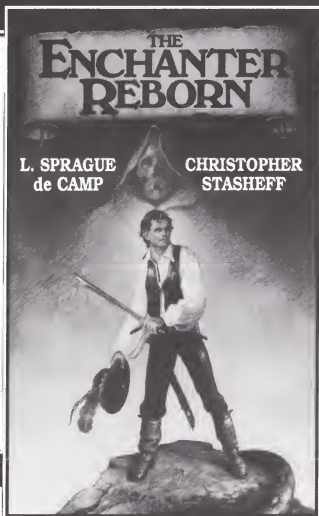
"Your chair—it's kind of like a modified shell, isn't it?" she asked curiously, deciding that if they were going to bring the subject up, *she* wasn't going to be polite and avoid it. "I know a shellperson. Moira, she's a brainship."

"Dead on!" Kenny said cheerfully. "Medico on the half-shell, that's me! I just had a stupid accident when I was a twenite, not like you, getting bit by alien bugs!"

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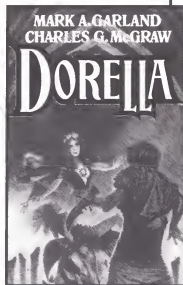
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She smiled tentatively. *I think I'm going to like him.* "Did anyone ever tell you that you look *just* like Amenemhat the Third?"

His large eyes widened even more. "Well, no—that is definitely a new one. I hope it's a compliment! One of my patients said I looked like Largo Delphin, the synthocom star, but I didn't know she thought Largo looked like a refugee from a slaver camp!"

"It is," she assured him hastily. "He's one of my favorite Pharaohs."

"I'll have to see if I can't cultivate the proper Pharaonic majesty, then," Kenny replied with a grin. "It might do me some good when I have to drum some sense into the heads of some of the Psychs around here! They've been trying to get at you ever since we admitted you."

If she could have shivered with apprehension, she would have. "I don't have to see them, do I?" she asked in a small voice. "They never stop asking stupid questions!"

"Absolutely not," Anna said firmly. "I have a double-doctorate; one of them is in headshrinking. I am *quite* capable of assessing you all by myself."

Tia's heart sank when Anna mentioned her degree in Psych—but it rose the moment she referred to Psych as "headshrinking." None of the Psychs who had plagued her life until now ever called their profession by something as frivolous as "headshrinking."

She patted Tia's shoulder. "Don't worry, Tia. It's my opinion that you are a very brave young lady—a little *too* responsible, but otherwise just fine. They spend too much time analyzing children and not enough time actually seeing them." She smiled inside her helmet, and a curl of hair escaped down to dangle above her left eyebrow, making her look a lot more human.

"Listen, Tia, there's a little bit of fur missing from your bear, and a scrap of stuffing," Kenny said. "Anna says you wouldn't notice, but I thought we ought to tell you anyway. We checked him over for Alien Bugs and neurotoxins, and he's got a clean bill of health. When you come out of Coventry, we'll Decontam him again to be sure, but we *know* he wasn't the problem, in case you were wondering."

She had wondered . . . Moira wouldn't have done anything on purpose, of course, but it would have been horrible if her sickness had been due to Ted. Moira would have felt awful not to mention how Tomas would feel.

"What's his name?" Anna asked, busying herself with something at the head of the bed. Tia couldn't turn her head far enough to see what it was.

"Theodore Edward Bear," she replied, surreptitiously rubbing her cheek against his soft fur. "Moira gave him to me, because she used to have a bear named Ivan the Bearable."

"Excellent name, Theodore. It suits him," Anna said. "You know, I think your Moira and I must be about the same age—there was a kind of fad for bears when I was little. I had a really nice bear in a flying suit called Amelia Bearhart." She chuckled. "I still have her, actually, but she mostly sits on the bureau in my guest room. She's gotten to be a very venerable matriarch in her old age."

But bears weren't really what she wanted to talk about.

Now that she knew where she was, and that she was in Isolation. "How long am I going to be in here?" she asked in a small voice.

Kenny turned very serious, and Anna stopped fiddling with things. Kenny sucked on his lower lip for a moment before actually replying, and the hum of the machinery in her room seemed very loud. "The Psychs were trying to tell us that we should try and cushion you, but—Tia, we think that you are a very unusual girl. We think you would rather know the complete truth. Is that the case?"

Would she? Or would she rather pretend—

But this wasn't like making up stories at a dig. If she pretended, things would only seem worse when they finally told her the truth, if it was bad.

"Ye-es," she told them both, slowly. "Please."

"We don't know," Anna told her. "I wish we did. We haven't found anything in your blood, and we're only just now trying to isolate things in your nervous system. But—well, we're assuming it's a bug that got you, a proto-virus, maybe, but we don't know, and that's the truth. Until we know, we won't know if we can fix you again."

Not when. If.

The possibility that she might *stay* like this for the rest of her life chilled her.

"Your parents are in isolation too," Kenny said hastily, "but they are one hundred percent fine. There's nothing wrong with them at all. So that makes things harder."

"I understand, I think," she said in a small, nervous-sounding voice. She took a deep breath. "Am I getting worse?"

Anna went very still. Kenny's face darkened, and he bit his lower lip.

"Well," he said quietly. "Yes. We're having to think about mobility, and maybe even life-support for you. Something considerably more than my chair. I wish I could tell you differently, Tia."

"That's all right," she said, trying to ease his distress. "I'd rather know."

Anna leaned down to whisper something through her suit-mike. "Tia, if you're afraid of crying, don't be. If I were in your position, I'd cry. And if you would like to be alone, tell us, all right?"

"Okay," she replied faintly. "Uh, can I be alone for a while, please?"

"Sure." She stopped pretending to fuss with equipment, and nodded shortly at the holoscreen. Kenny brought up one hand to wave at her, and the screen blinked out. Anna left through what Tia now realized was a decontamination lock a moment later. Leaving her alone with the hissing, humming equipment, and Ted.

She swallowed a lump in her throat, and thought very hard about what they'd told her.

She wasn't getting any better, she was getting worse. They didn't know what was wrong. That was on the negative side; on the plus side, there was nothing wrong with Mum and Dad, and they hadn't said to give up all hope.

Therefore, she should continue to assume that they would find a cure.

She cleared her throat. "Hello?" she said.

As she had thought, an AI was monitoring the room. "Hello," it replied, in the curiously accentless voice only an AI could produce. "What is your need?"

"I'd like to watch a holo. History," she said, after a moment of thought. "There's a holo about Queen Hatshepsut of Egypt. It's called *Phoenix of Ra*, I think. Have you got that?"

That had been on the forbidden list at home; Tia knew why. There had been some pretty steamy scenes with the Pharaoh and her architect in there. Tia was fascinated by the only female to declare herself Pharaoh, however, and had been decidedly annoyed when a little sex kept her from viewing this one.

"Yes, I have access to that," the AI said after a moment. "Would you like to view it now?"

So they hadn't put any restrictions on her viewing privileges! "Yes," she replied; then, eager to strike while she had the chance, "And after that, I'd like to see the *Aten* trilogy, about Ahnkenaten and the heretics—that's *Aten Rising*, *Aten at Zenith*, and *Aten Descending*."

Those had more than a few steamy scenes; she'd overheard her mother saying that some of the theories that had been dramatized fairly explicitly in the trilogy, while they made comprehensible some otherwise inexplicable findings, would get the holos banned in some cultures. And Braddon had chuckled and replied that the costumes alone—or lack of them—while completely accurate, would do the same. Still, Tia figured she could handle it. And if it was that bad, it would *certainly* help keep her mind off her own troubles!

"Very well," the AI said agreeably. "Shall I begin?"

"Yes," she told it, with another caress of her cheek on Ted's soft fur. "Please."

Pota and Braddon watched their daughter with frozen faces, faces that Tia was convinced covered a complete welter of emotions that they didn't want her to see. She took a deep breath, enunciated, "Chair forward, five feet," and her Moto-Chair glided forward and stopped before it touched them.

"Well, now I can get around at least," she said, with what she hoped sounded like cheer. "I was getting *awfully* tired of the same four walls!"

Whatever it was that she had—and now she had heard the words "proto-virus" and "dystropic sclerosis" bandied about more often than not—the medics had decided it wasn't contagious. They'd let Pota and Braddon out of Isolation, and they'd moved Tia to another room, one that had a door right onto the corridor. Not that it made much difference, except that Anna didn't have to use a decontam-airlock and pressure-suit anymore. And now Kenny came to see her in person. But four white walls were still four white walls, and there wasn't much variation in rooms.

Still, she was afraid to ask for things to personalize the room. Afraid that if she made it more her own—she'd be stuck in it. Forever.

Her numbness and paralysis extended to most of her body now, except for her facial muscles. And there it stopped, just as inexplicably as it had begun.

They'd put her in the quadriplegic version of the Moto-Chair; just like Kenny's except that she controlled hers with a few commands and a series of tongue-switches and eye movements. A command sent it forward, and the direction she looked would tell it where to go. And hers had mechanical "arms" that followed set patterns programmed in to respond to more commands. Any command had to be prefaced by "chair" or "arm." A clumsy system, but it was the best they could do without direct synaptic connections from the brainstem, like those of a shellperson.

Her brainstem was still intact, anyway. Whatever it was had gotten her spine, but not that.

Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, she thought with bitter irony, *how was the play?*

"What do you think, pumpkin?" Braddon asked, his voice quivering only a little.

"Hey, this is stellar, Dad," she replied cheerfully. "It's just like piloting a ship! I think I'll challenge Doctor Kenny to a race!"

Pota swallowed very hard, and managed a tremulous smile. "It won't be for too long," she said without conviction. "As soon as they find out what's set up house-keeping in there, they'll have you better in no time."

She bit her lip to keep from snapping back, and dug up a fatuous grin from somewhere. The likelihood of finding a cure diminished more with every day, and she knew it. Neither Anna nor Kenny made any attempt to hide that from her.

But there was no point in making her parents unhappy. They already felt bad enough.

She tried out all the points of the chair for them, until not even they could stand it anymore. They left, making excuses and promising to come back—and they were succeeded immediately by a stream of interns and neurological specialists, each of whom had more variations on the same basic questions she had answered a thousand times, each of whom had his own pet theory about what was wrong.

"First my toes felt like they were asleep when I woke up one morning, but it wore off. Then it didn't wear off. Then instead of waking up with tingles, I woke up numb. No, sir, it never actually hurt. No, ma'am, it only went as far as my heel at first. Yes, sir, then after two days my fingers started. No ma'am, just the fingers, not the whole hand. . . ."

Hours of it. But she knew that they weren't being nasty, they were trying to *help* her, and being able to help her depended on how cooperative she was.

But their questions didn't stop the questions of her own. So far it was just sensory nerves and voluntary muscles and nerves. What if it went to the involuntary ones, and she woke up unable to breathe? What then? What if she lost control of her facial muscles? Every little tingle made her break out in a sweat of panic, thinking it was going to happen. . . .

Nobody had answers for any questions. Not hers, and not theirs.

Finally, just before dinner, they went away. After about a half an hour, she mastered control of the arms

enough to feed herself, saving herself the humiliation of having to call a nurse to do it. And the chair's own plumbing solved the humiliation of the natural result of eating and drinking. . . .

After supper, when the tray was taken away, she was left in the growing darkness of the room, quite alone. She would have slumped, if she could have. It was just as well that Pota and Braddon hadn't returned; having them there was a strain. It was harder to be brave in front of them than it was in front of strangers.

"Chair, turn seventy degrees right," she ordered. "Left arm, pick up bear."

With a soft whirr, the chair obeyed her.

"Left arm, put bear—cancel. Left arm, bring bear to left of face." The arm moved a little. "Closer. Closer. Hold."

Now she cuddled Ted against her cheek, and she could pretend that it was her own arm holding him there.

With no one there to see, slow, hot tears formed in her eyes, and trickled down her cheeks. She leaned her head to the left a little, so that they would soak into Ted's soft blue fur and not betray her.

"It's not fair," she whispered to Ted, who seemed to nod with sad agreement as she rubbed her cheek against him. "It's not fair. . . ."

I wanted to find the EsKay homeworld. I wanted to go out with Mum and Dad and be the one to find the homeworld. I wanted to write books. I wanted to stand up in front of people and make them laugh and get excited, and see how history and archeology aren't dead, they're just asleep. I wanted to do things they make bolos out of. I wanted—I wanted—

*I wanted to see things! I wanted to drive grav-sleds and swim in a real lagoon and feel a storm and—
—and I wanted—*

Some of the scenes from the holos she'd been watching came back with force now; and memories of Pota and Braddon, when they thought she was engrossed in a book or a holo, giggling and cuddling like tweenies. . . .

I wanted to find out about boys. Boys and kisses and—

And now nobody's ever going to look at me and see me. All they're going to see is this big metal thing. That's all they see now. . . .

Even if a boy ever wanted to kiss me, he'd have to get past a half-ton of machinery, and it would probably beep an alarm.

The tears poured faster now, with the darkness of the room to hide them.

They wouldn't have put me in this thing if they thought I was going to get better. I'm never going to get better. I'm only going to get worse. I can't feel anything, I'm nothing but a head in a machine. And if I get worse, will I go deaf? Blind?

"Teddy, what's going to happen to me?" she sobbed. "Am I going to spend the rest of my life in a room?"

Ted didn't know, any more than she did.

"It's not fair, it's not fair, I never did anything," she wept, as Ted watched her tears with round, sad eyes,

and soaked them up for her. "It's not fair. I wasn't finished. I hadn't even started yet. . . ."

Kenny grabbed a tissue with one hand and snapped off the camera-relay with the other. He scrubbed fiercely at his eyes and blew his nose with a combination of anger and grief. Anger, at his own impotence. Grief, for the vulnerable little girl alone in that cold, impersonal hospital room, a little girl who was doing her damndest to put a brave face on everything.

In public. He was the only one to watch her in private, like this, when she thought there was no one to see that her whole pose of cheer was nothing more than a facade.

"I wasn't finished. I hadn't even started yet."

"Damn it," he swore, scrubbing at his eyes again and pounding the arm of his chair. "Damn it anyway!" What careless god had caused her to choose the very words *he* had used, fifteen years ago?

Fifteen years ago, when a stupid accident had left him paralyzed from the waist down and put an end—he thought—to his dreams for med school?

Fifteen years ago, when Doctor Harwat Kline-Bes was his doctor, and had heard him weeping alone into his pillow?

He turned his chair and opened the viewport out into the stars, staring at them as they moved past in a panorama of perfect beauty that changed with the rotation of the station. He let the tears dry on his cheeks, let his mind empty.

Fifteen years ago, another neurologist had heard those stammered, heartbroken words, and had determined that they *would* not become a truth. He had taken a paraplegic young student, bullied the makers of an experimental Moto-Chair into giving the youngster one—then bullied the dean of the Meyasor State Medical College into admitting the boy. *Then* he had seen to it that once the boy graduated, he got an internship in this very hospital—a place where a neurologist in a Moto-Chair was no great curiosity, not with the sentiments of a hundred worlds coming in as patients and doctors. . . .

A paraplegic, though. Not a quad. Not a child with a brilliant, flexible mind, trapped in an inert body.

Brilliant mind. Inert body. Brilliant—

An idea blinded him, it occurred so suddenly. He was not the only person watching Tia—there was one other. Someone who watched every patient here, every doctor, every nurse. . . . Someone he didn't consult too often, because Lars wasn't a medico, or a shrink—

But in this case, Lars's opinion was likely to be more accurate than anyone else's on this station. Including his own.

He thumbed a control. "Lars," he said shortly. "Got a minute, buddy?"

He had to wait for a moment. Lars was a busy guy—though hopefully at this hour there weren't too many demands on his conversational circuits. "Certainly, Kenny," Lars replied after a few seconds. "How can I help the neurological *wunderkind* of Central Worlds MedStation *Pride of Albion*? Hmm?" The voice was rich and ironic; Lars rather enjoyed teasing everyone on board.

He called it "therapeutic deflation of egos." He particularly liked deflating Kenny's—he had said more than once that everyone else was so afraid of being "unkind to the poor cripple" that they danced on eggs to avoid telling him when he was full of it.

"Can the sarcasm, Lars," Kenny replied. "I've got a serious problem that I want your opinion on."

"My opinion?" Lars sounded genuinely surprised. "This must be a personal opinion—I'm certainly not qualified to give you a medical one."

"Most definitely, a very personal opinion, one that you are the best suited to give. On Hypatia Cade."

"Ah," Lars thought that Lars's tone softened considerably. "She thinks I'm the AI. I haven't dissuaded her."

"Good; I want her to be herself around you, for the gods of space know she won't be herself around the rest of us." He realized that his tone had gone savage, and carefully regained control over himself before he continued. "You've got her records and you've watched the kid herself. I know she's old for it—but how would she do in the shell program?"

A long pause. Longer than Lars needed simply to access and analyze records. "Has her condition stabilized?" he asked cautiously. "If it hasn't—if she goes brain-inert halfway into her schooling—it would not only make problems for anyone else you'd want to bring in late, it'll traumatize the other shellkids badly. They don't handle death well."

Kenny massaged his temple with the long, clever fingers that had worked so many surgical miracles for others, and could do nothing for this little girl. "As far as we can tell anything about this . . . disease . . . yes," he said finally. "Take a look in there and you'll see I ordered a shotgun approach while we were testing her. She's had a full course of every antiviral neurological agent we've got a record of. *And* noninvasive things like a course of ultra—well, you can see it there. I think we killed it, whatever it was."

Too late to help her. Damn it.

"She's brilliant," Lars said cautiously. "She's flexible. She has the ability to multitread, to do several things at once. And she's had good, positive reactions to contact with shellpersons in the past."

"So?" Kenny asked impatiently, as the stars passed by in their courses, indifferent to the fate of one little girl. "Your opinion."

"I think she can make the transition," Lars said, with more emphasis than Kenny had ever heard in his voice before. "I think she'll not only make the transition, she'll do well."

He let out the breath he'd been holding in a sigh.

"Physically, she is certainly no worse off than many in the shellperson program, including yours truly," Lars continued. "Frankly, Kenny, she's got so much potential it would be a crime to let her rot in a hospital room for the rest of her life."

The careful control Lars normally had over his voice was gone; there was passion in his words that Kenny had never heard him display until this moment. "Got to you, too, did she?" he said dryly.

"Yes," Lars said, biting off the word. "And I'm not ashamed of it. I don't mind telling you that she has me in—well, not tears, but certainly the equivalent."

"Good for you." He rubbed his hands together, warming cold fingers. "Because I'm going to need your connivance again."

"Going to pull another fast one, are you?" Lars asked with ironic amusement.

"Just a few strings. What good does being a stellar intellect do me, if I can't make use of the position?" he asked rhetorically. He shut the viewport and pivoted his chair to face his desk, keying on his terminal and linking it directly to Lars and a very personal database. One called "Favors." "All right, my friend, let's get to work. Who has influence in the program; of that set, who owes me the most; and of that subset, who's due here the soonest?"

A Sector Secretary-General did not grovel, nor did he gush, but to Kenny's immense satisfaction, when Quintan Waldheim-Querar y Chan came aboard the *Pride of Albion*, the very first thing he wanted, after all the official inspections and the like were over, was to meet with the brilliant neurologist whose work had saved his nephew from the same fate as Kenny himself. He already knew most of what there was to know about Kenny and his meteoric career.

And Quintan Waldheim-Querar y Chan was not the sort to avoid an uncomfortable topic.

"A little ironic, isn't it?" the Secretary General said, after the firm handshake, with a glance at Kenny's Moto-Chair. He stood up and did *not* tug self-consciously at his conservative dark blue tunic.

Kenny did not smile, but he took a deep breath of satisfaction. *Doubly good. No more calls; we have a winner.*

"What, that my injury was virtually identical to Peregrine's?" he replied immediately. "Not ironic at all, sir. The fact that I found myself in this position was what prompted me to go into neurology in the first place. I won't try to claim that if I *badn't* been injured, and *badn't* worked so hard to find a remedy for the same injuries, someone else might not have come up with the same answer that I did. Medical research is a matter of building on what has come before, after all."

"But without your special interest, the solution might well have come too late to do Peregrine any good," the Secretary-General countered. "And it was not only your technique, it was your skill that pulled him through. There is no duplication of that—not in this Sector, anyway. That's why I arranged for this visit. I wanted to thank you."

Kenny shrugged deprecatingly. This was the most perfect opening he'd ever seen in his life—and he had no intention of letting it get away from him. Not when he had the answer to Tia's prayers trapped in his office.

"I can't win them all, sir," he said flatly. "I'm not a god. Though there are times I wish most profoundly that I was, and right now is one of them."

The Great Man's expression sobered. The Secretary-General was not just a Great Man because he was an

excellent administrator; he was one because he had a human side, and that human and humane side could be touched. "I take it you have a case that is troubling you?" Then, in the consciousness that he owed Kenny, he said the magic words. "Perhaps I can help?"

Kenny sighed, as if he were reluctant to continue the discussion. *Wouldn't do to seem too eager.* "Well—would you care to see some tape of the child?"

Child. Children were one of the Great Man's weaknesses. He had sponsored more child-oriented programs than any three of his predecessors combined. "Yes. If it would not be violating the child's privacy."

"Here—" Kenny flicked a switch, triggering the holo-tape he already had keyed up. A tape he and Anna had put together. Carefully edited, carefully selected, compiled from days of tape with Lars's assistance and the psych-profile of the Great Man to guide them. "I promise I won't take more than fifteen minutes of your time."

The first seven and a half minutes of this tape were of Tia at her most attractive; being very brave and cheerful for the interns and her parents. "This is Hypatia Cade, the daughter of Pota Andropolous-Cade and Braddon Maartens-Cade," he explained, over the holo. Quickly he outlined her background, and her pathetic little story, stressing her high intelligence, her flexibility, her responsibility. "The prognosis isn't very cheerful, I'm afraid," he said, watching his chrono carefully to time his speech with the end of that section of tape. "No matter what we do, she's doomed to spend the rest of her life in some institution or other. The only way she could be at all mobile would be through direct synaptic connections—well, we don't do that here—"

He stopped, as the holo flickered and darkened. Tia was alone.

The arm of her chair reached out and grasped the sad little blue bear, hidden until now by the tray table and a pillow. It brought the toy in close to her face, and she gently rubbed her cheek against its soft fur coat. The lightning-bolt of the Courier Service on its shirt stood out clearly in this shot . . . one reason why Kenny had chosen it.

"They've gone, Ted," she whispered to her bear. "Mum and Dad—they've gone back to the Institute. There's nobody left here but you, now."

A single bright tear formed in one corner of her eye, and slowly rolled down her cheek, catching what little light there was in the room.

"What? Oh, no, it's not their fault, Ted—they had to. The Institute said so, I saw the dispatch. It said—it said since I w-w-wasn't going to get any b-b-better there was no p-p-p-point in—in—wasting v-v-valuable t-t-time—"

She sobbed once, and buried her face in the teddy-bear's fur.

After a moment, her voice came again, muffled. "And, it hurts them so m-much. And it's s-so hard to be b-brave for them. But if I cried, th-they'd only feel w-worse. I think m-maybe it's b-better this way, don't you? Easier. F-for every-b-b-b-body. . . ."

The holo flickered again; same time, nearly the same position, but a different day. This time she was crying

openly, tears coursing down her cheeks as she sobbed into the bear's little shirt.

"We've given her the complete run of the Library and the holo collection," Kenny said very softly. "Normally, they keep her relatively amused and stimulated—but just before we filmed this, she picked out an episode of *The Stellar Explorers*—and . . . well . . . her parents said she had planned to be a pilot, you see—"

She continued to cry, sobbing helplessly, the only understandable words being "—Teddy—I wanted—to go—I wanted to see the *stars*—"

The holo flickered on as Kenny turned the lights in his office back up. He reached for a tissue and wiped his eyes without shame. "I'm afraid she affects me rather profoundly," he said, and smiled weakly. "So much for my professional detachment."

The Great Man blinked rapidly to clear his own eyes. "Why isn't something being done for that child?" he demanded, his voice hoarse.

"We've done all we can, here," Kenny said. "The only possibility of giving that poor child any kind of a life is to get her into the shellperson program. But the Psychs at the Laboratory Schools seem to think she's too old. They wouldn't send someone to come evaluate her. . . ."

He let the sentence trail off significantly. The Secretary-General gave him a sharp look. "And you don't agree with them, I take it?"

Kenny shrugged. "It isn't just *my* opinion," he said smoothly. "It's the opinion of the staff Psych assigned to her, the shellperson running this Station, and a brainship friend of hers in the Courier Service. The one," he added delicately, "who gave her that little bear."

Mentioning the bear sold the deal, Kenny could see it in the Great Man's expression. "We'll just see about that," the Secretary-General said. "The people you talked to don't have all the answers—and they *certainly* don't have the final say." He stood up and offered Kenny his hand again. "I won't promise anything—but don't be surprised if there's someone from the Laboratory Schools here to see her in the next few days. How soon can you have her ready for transfer, if they take her?"

"Within twelve hours, sir," Kenny replied, secretly congratulating himself for getting her parents to sign a writ of consent before they left. Of course, they thought it was for experimental procedures.

Then again, Pota and Braddon had been the ones who had broached the idea of the shellperson program to the people at the Laboratory Schools and had been turned down because of Tia's age.

"Twelve hours?" The Great Man raised an eyebrow. Kenny returned him look for look.

"Her parents are under contract to the Archeological Institute," he explained. "The Institute called them back out into the field, because their parental emergency leave was up. They weren't happy, but it was obey or be fired. Hard to find another job in that field that isn't with the Institute." He coughed. "Well, they trusted my work, and made me Tia's full guardian before they left."

"So you have right of disposition. Very tidy." The Secretary-General's wry smile showed that he knew he had

been maneuvered into this—and that he was not annoyed. “All right. There’ll be someone from the Schools here within the week. Unless there’s something you haven’t told me about the girl, he should finish his evaluation in two days. At the end of those two days . . .” One eyebrow raised significantly. “Well, it would be very convenient if he could take the new recruit back with him, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” Kenny said happily. “It would indeed, sir.”

If it hadn’t been for Doctor Uhua-Sorg’s reputation and the pleas of his former pupil, Lars Mendoza, Philip Gryphon bint Brogen would have been only too happy to tell the Committee where to stick the Secretary-General’s request. *And* what to do with it after they put it there. One did not pull strings to get an unsuitable candidate into the shell program! Maybe the Secretary-General thought he could get away with that kind of politicking with Academy admissions, but he was going to find out differently *here*.

Philip was not inclined to be coaxed and *would not* give in to bullying. So it was in a decidedly belligerent state of mind that he disembarked from his shuttle onto the docks of the *Pride of Albion*. Like every hospital station, this one affronted him with its sterile white walls and atmosphere of self-importance.

There was someone waiting—obviously for him—in the reception area. Someone in a Moto-Chair. A handsome young man with thick, dark hair and a thin, ascetic face.

If they think they can soften me up by assigning me to someone they think I won’t dare be rude to— he thought savagely, as the young man glided the Chair toward him. *Conniving beggars—*

“Professor Brogen?” said the ridiculously young, vulnerable-looking man, holding out his hand. “I’m Doctor Sorg.”

“If you think I’m—” Brogen began, *not* reaching out to take it. Then the name registered on him and he did a classic double-take. “*Doctor Sorg?* Doctor Uhua-Sorg?”

The young man nodded, just the barest trace of a smile showing on his lips.

“Doctor Kennet Uhua-Sorg?” Brogen asked, feeling as if he’d been set up, yet knowing he had set up himself.

“Yes indeed,” the young man replied. “I take it that you weren’t—ah—expecting me to meet you in person.”

A chance for an out—not a graceful one, but an out—and Brogen took it. “Hardly,” he replied brusquely. “The Chief of Neurosurgery and Neurological Research usually does not meet a simple professor on behalf of an ordinary child.”

“Tia is far from ordinary, Professor,” Doctor Sorg responded, never once losing that hint of smile. “But, if you’ll follow me, you’ll find that out for yourself.”

Well, he’s right about one thing. Brogen thought grudgingly, after an hour spent in Tia’s company while hordes of interns and specialists pestered, poked and prodded her. *She’s not ordinary. Any “ordinary” child would be having a screaming tantrum by now.* She was an extraordinarily attractive child as well as a patient one; her

dark hair had been cropped short to keep it out of the way, but her thin, pixelike face and big eyes made her look like the model for a Victorian fairy. A fairy trapped in a fist of metal . . . tormented and teased by a swarm of wasps.

“How much longer is this going to go on?” he asked Kennet Sorg in an irritated whisper.

Kennet raised one eyebrow. “That’s for you to say,” he replied. “You are here to evaluate her. If you want more time alone with her, you have only to say the word. This is her second session for the day, by the way,” he added, and Brogen could have sworn there was a hint of—smugness?—in his voice. “She played host to another swarm this morning, between nine and noon.”

Now Brogen was outraged, but on the child’s behalf. Kennet Sorg must have read that in his expression, for he turned his chair toward the cluster of white-uniformed interns, cleared his throat, and got their instant attention.

“That will be all for today,” he said quietly. “If you please, ladies and gentlemen. Professor Brogen would like to have some time with Tia alone.”

There were looks of disappointment and some even of disgust cast Brogen’s way, but he ignored them. The child, at least, looked relieved.

Before he could say anything to Kennet Sorg, he realized that the doctor had followed the others out the door, which was closing behind his chair, leaving Brogen alone with the child. He cleared his own throat awkwardly.

The little girl looked at him with a most peculiar expression in her eyes. Not fear, but wariness.

“You’re not a Psych, are you?” she asked.

“Well—no,” he said. “Not exactly. I’ll probably ask some of the same questions, though.”

She sighed, and closed her soft brown eyes for a moment. “I’m *very* tired of having my head shrunk,” she replied forthrightly. “Very, *very* tired. And it isn’t going to make any difference at all in the way I think, anyway. It isn’t *fair*, but this”—she bobbed her chin at her chair—“isn’t going to go away because it isn’t fair. Right?”

“Sad, but true, my dear.” He began to relax, and realized why. Kennet Sorg was right. This was no ordinary child; talking with her was not like talking to a child—but it *was* like talking to one of the kids in the shell program. “So—how about if we chat about something else entirely. Do you know any shellpersons?”

She gave him an odd look. “They must not have told you very much about me,” she said. “Either that, or you didn’t pay very much attention. One of my very best friends is a brainship—Moirá Valentine-Maya. She gave me Theodore.”

Theodore. Ob—right. The bear. He cast a quick glance over toward the bed—and there was the somber-looking little bear in a Courier-Service shirt that he’d been told about.

“Did you ever think about what being in a shell must be like?” he asked, fishing for a way to explain the program to her without letting her know she was being evaluated.

“Of course I did!” she said, not bothering to hide her scorn. “I told Moira that I wanted to be just like her when

I grew up, and she laughed at me and told me all about what the Schools were like and everything—”

And then, before he could say anything, the unchild-like child proceeded to tell *him* about his own program. The brainship side, at any rate.

Pros, and cons. From having to be able to multitask, to the thrill of experiencing a Singularity and warp-space first-hand. From being locked forever in a metal skin, to the loneliness of knowing that you were going to outlive all your partners but the last. . . .

“I told her that I guessed I didn’t want to go in when I figured out that you could never touch anybody again,” she concluded wearily. “I know you’ve got sensors to the skin and everything, but that was what I didn’t like. Kind of funny, huh?”

“Why?” he asked, without thinking.

“Because now—I can’t touch anybody. And I won’t ever again. So it’s kind of funny. I can’t touch anyone anymore, but I can’t be a brainship either.” The tired resignation in her voice galvanized him.

“I don’t know why you couldn’t,” he said, aware that he had already made up his mind, and both aghast and amused at himself. “There’s room in this year’s class for another couple of brainship candidates.”

She blinked at him, then blurted, “But they told me I was too old!”

He laughed. “My dear, *you* would have been a good shell-program candidate well past puberty.” He still couldn’t believe this child; responsible, articulate, flexible . . . Lars and Kennet Sorg had been right. It made him wonder how many other children had been rejected out of hand, simply because of age . . . how many had been lost to a sterile existence in an institution, just because they had no one as persistent and as influential as Kennet Sorg to plead their cases.

Well, one thing at a time. Grab this one now. Put something in place to take care of the others later. “I’m going to have to go through the motions and file the paperwork—but Tia, if you want, you can consider yourself recruited this very instant.”

“Yes!” she burst out, “Oh, yes! Yes, yes, yes! Oh, please, thank you, thank you so much—” Her cheeks were wet with tears, but the joy on her face was so intense that it was blinding. Professor Brogen blinked, and swallowed a lump in his throat.

“The advantage of recruiting someone your age,” he said, ignoring her tears and his tickling eyes, “is that you can make your career-path decision right away. Shell-persons don’t all go into brainships—for instance, you *could* opt for a career with the Institute; they’ve been asking to hire a shellperson to head their home-base Research section for the last twenty years. You could do original research on the findings of others—even your parents. You could become a Spaceport Administrator, or a Station Administrator. You could go into law, or virtually any branch of science, even medicine.”

“But I want to be a brainship,” she said firmly.

Brogen took a deep breath. While he agreed with her emotionally—well, there were some serious drawbacks. “Tia, a lot of what a brainship does is—well, being a

truck-driver or a cabby. Ferrying people or things from one place to another. It isn’t very glamorous work. It is quite dangerous, physically and psychologically. You would be very valuable, and yet totally unarmed, unless you went into the Military branch, which I don’t think you’re suited for, frankly. You would be a target for thieves and malcontents. And there’s one other thing; the *ship* is very expensive. Brainship service is just one short step from indentured slavery. You are literally paying for the use and upkeep of that ship by mortgaging yourself. There is very little chance of buying your contract out unless you do something truly spectacular, or take on very dangerous duties. The former isn’t likely to happen in ordinary service—and you won’t be able to exchange boring service for whatever your fancy is.”

Tia looked stubborn for a moment, then thoughtful. “All of that is true,” she said finally. “But—Professor, Dad always said I had his Astrogator genes, and I was already getting into tensor physics, so I *have* the head for starflight. And it’s what I want.”

Brogen turned up his hands. “I can’t argue with that. There’s no arguing with preferences, is there?” In a way, he was rather pleased. As self-possessed as Tia was, she would do very well in brainship service. And as stable as she seemed to be, there was very little chance of her having psychological problems.

She smiled shyly. “I talked this over with Moira, you know, giving her ideas on how she could get some extra credits to help with all her fines for bouncing her brawns. Since she was with Archeology and Exploration as a courier, there were chances for her to see things the surveyors might not, and I kind of told her what to look for. I kind of figured that with my background, I could get assigned to A and E myself, and I could do the same things, only better. I could get a *lot* of credits that way. And once I owned my ship—well, I could do whatever I wanted.”

Brogen couldn’t help himself; he started to laugh. “You are quite the young schemer, did you know that?”

She grinned, looking truly happy for the first time since he had seen her. Now that he had seen the real thing, he recognized all her earlier “smiles” for the shams that they had been.

Leaving her here would have been a crime. A sin.

“Well, you can consider yourself recruited,” he said comfortably. “I’ll fill out the paperwork tonight, data-burst it to the Schools as soon as I finish, and there should be a confirmation waiting for us when we wake up. Think you can be ready to ship out in the morning?”

“Yes, sir,” she said happily.

He rose and started to leave, then paused.

“You know,” he said, “you were right. I really didn’t pay too much attention to the file they gave me on you, since I was so certain that . . . well, never mind. But I am terribly curious about your name. Why on earth did your parents call you ‘Hypatia?’”

Tia laughed out loud, a peal of infectious enjoyment.

“I think, Professor Brogen,” she said, “that you’d better sit back down!”

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